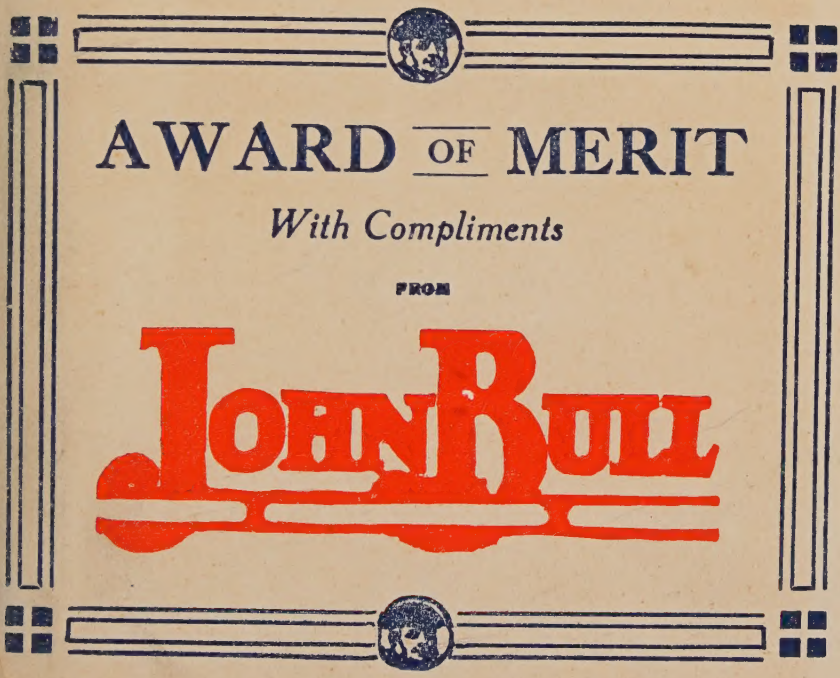
AWARD OF MERIT
With Compliments
FROM
JOHN BULL

FELIX CHRISTIE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

A SPIRIT OF MIRTH

THE STORY OF VIRGINIA PERFECT

FELIX CHRISTIE

BY

PEGGY WEBLING

AUTHOR OF "THE STORY OF VIRGINIA PERFECT"

SECOND EDITION

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FELIX CHRISTIE

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CHAPTER I

THE FIRST VIOLIN

A BIG room with a low ceiling, poorly lighted by a dozen or so of oil lamps on wooden brackets hanging against the walls ; Christmas decorations in the shape of huge boughs of fir, with a few sprigs, in vases on the mantelpiece, of holly and mistletoe, very shrivelled and dry ; a row of cane seats, with several rocking-chairs arranged on either side of the open door, for the accommodation of onlookers ; a wide, clear floor, polished by many feet—such was the ballroom at old Grinstead's Farm.

If the ghost of old Grinstead haunted its former home on this particular night, it was probably amazed, and highly shocked, at the prodigal hospitality of young Grinstead.

Picture old Grinstead standing in the doorway ! He would look tall and brawny, that severe old ghost of a pioneer, with the face of a Somerset man, a grizzled beard, shrewd blue eyes, a heavy nose, and firm mouth.

The squarely built house, with wide verandahs, would have dwindled—if it is true that ghosts create their own surroundings—into a log hut, close and warm and smelling of the earth, and beyond it, in place of the wide fields, would have stretched an uncleared forest.

The merry party of girls and boys, dancing together,

would have changed into old Grinstead's family, perhaps with the addition of a couple of hired men, or a friend from the neighbouring town some five miles away, or even a Red Indian, wrapped in his old dirty blanket, smoking the pipe of peace with the kind, hard-fisted white men from over the sea.

It was so many years since old Grinstead and his wife emigrated to Ontario, Canada, that his son, still known as " young," was a middle-aged man, the present ball being held in honour of his birthday. He had recently married a comparatively young wife, who was considered very fashionable and up-to-date by his neighbours and friends, who took it ill, after the manner of neighbours and friends, but gladly accepted her lavish hospitality.

The invitations, printed on fancy cards at the newspaper office of the adjacent town of Mapleville, were greatly admired, if somewhat severely criticized, on account of their formality.

" Mr. and Mrs. J. Grinstead request your company to a Ball and Supper at Grinstead Settlement, in honour of their fifty-third and thirty-second birthdays respectively (Mr. G. December 5th, Mrs. G. last June)."

In the left-hand corner of the card was the date of the party, and in the right—a touch of elegance never before seen on a Grinstead Settlement invitation—appeared the four words, " Professor Wiggins' Select Orchestra."

It was a rainy, windy night. The visitors, with the exception of very near neighbours, drove to the ball in hooded buggies or farm carts, John Junior—Mr. Grinstead was a widower with grown-up sons when he married his fashionable wife—being deputed to look after the horses and " rigs."

It was not a very congenial task for a young man anxious to join in the festivities, and his gallantry towards the ladies, swinging them out of their seats in his arms, or indulging in playful struggles or impromptu waltzes, was quite pardonable in the circumstances.

Supper was served in the kitchen, where Mrs. Grinstead, with a big white apron tied over her best dress, served the oyster stew from a seething pan on the stove, while cold turkeys adorned both ends of the board, the intermediate spaces being filled with cakes of every description, doughnuts, soda crackers, jars of home-made pickles and candies, saucers of canned fruits—sugary citron, raspberries as luscious as on the day they were gathered, pears, cherries, and rich, woody maple syrup—while there stood, at intervals along the table, little coloured glass vases filled with toothpicks, thus prettily combining utility and ornament.

The ball had opened, according to custom at Grinstead's Settlement twenty years ago, with a Grand Promenade.

All the visitors, even the people who were too old and the children who were too young to dance, marched smartly round and round the big room until they were tired out. This was followed by a programme that would bewilder the modern dancer, whose idea of a ball begins and ends with the word waltz, for it included polkas, Saratoga lancers, jerseys, ryes, bon-tons, coon-time two-steps, military schottishes, and Scotch reels.

The young people at Grinstead's were more or less acquainted with every tune and step, and they were ably marshalled through lengthy sets of lancers and quadrilles by a most energetic "caller-off," whose duties consisted of standing on a chair and bawling the different figures in detail as the dance progressed, never pausing in his efforts from his first shout, "Bow—chassay—an' off we go!" to his final command, "Promenade your lady to a seat!"

Professor Wiggins' orchestra was stationed in a corner by the stove in a very uncomfortable position, but conveniently out of the way of the darting couples.

The first note of the march for the Grand Promenade had been struck at seven o'clock. It was within half an hour of midnight, and there had been no pause in the music, except while the professor took an occasional draught of cider, or what was known as "logger," meaning lager beer.

It was not a large orchestra, for it consisted of Wiggins himself, who played the piano, and one fiddler. The professor said that he made a great point of keeping it select.

He was a little man, with shiny black hair, parted down the back of his head and brushed forward, as if every hair were making a painful effort to hide his bald pate. His face looked like a glowing coal, the drops of ineffectual perspiration continually pouring down into his limp, crushed collar.

His short, thick fingers, banging all the life out of the ancient piano, were adorned with several rings set with artificial diamonds. He wore a suit of ill-fitting evening clothes—their original owner must have been a man of more lofty stature and less girth—and, although Professor Wiggins was a rolling stone who gathered no moss, the knees of his trousers, shoulders, elbows, and the collar of his coat were green and shiny, while the list slippers on his feet, even more than the red silk handkerchief spread over the place where the bottom of his stiff shirt-front was supposed to be, suggested that he was not a slave to convention in attire.

He was an Englishman, and kept a little music-shop in the town. No one knew his antecedents, for he was as uncommunicative about his own affairs as he was talkative about the affairs of other people.

The title of professor had been bestowed upon him, according to his own account, at the Royal School of the Pianoforte in London, England; but he refused to give any particulars of the Royal School, and always introduced himself as "Professor Wiggins, of the Borough."

The fiddler in his orchestra—invariably mentioned as our First Violin, although there had never been a second, or a third, or any other player to cause confusion in the minds of his patrons—accompanied the professor's strum-strum-strumming with unflagging energy and spirit. The only sign of fatigue he showed was a certain drooping of his thin shoulders and decline of the right arm, as if the bow were growing heavy.

He was a tall, slight, wiry youth, our First Violin. His clothes hung loosely on him, his big boots were mud-splashed, and his trousers turned up at the bottom. He wore a stiff white collar and blue tie ; he had removed his cuffs, for greater ease, placing them on top of the piano. He played mechanically in perfect time, but displayed no interest in his surroundings, rarely lifting his eyes to glance at the gay scene before him.

Professor Wiggins, at the beginning of every new dance, rubbed his hot hands on his handkerchief, looked up at his companion, pointing to the place they had reached on the written programme with which they were provided.

" Lancers, Chris ! " he said, or " Waltz ! " or " Jersey ! " as the case might be. Chris nodded, but did not trouble to reply.

His face was pale and weary, but the skin was clear, and his eyes were singularly beautiful in shape and colour, grey-blue, with a peculiar steadiness of expression, as if the spirit looking out of them was very slow to be revealed—meditative—deeply conscious of itself.

His other features were well drawn, but did not suggest the determination of his character. There was still the delicacy of youth in the lines of his cheeks and chin ; the quick, self-conscious blood of adolescence flamed from neck to forehead at slight provocation ; his voice, not so long changed from the sweetest treble, had still to master, when he spoke as well as sang, harmony of tone.

He had little to say, except to lads of his own age whom he knew well, and not much even then, but there was something in his manner, shy and awkward as it was, that conciliated ; it was an unexpressed desire to please, a gentleness that might be mistaken for weakness, a latent and indescribable charm that is only possessed by men of rare qualities—men of strength and great character, or endowed with the gift of good fellowship and heart-easing mirth.

It was an hour after midnight before Professor Wiggins,

with a final rattle and crash, played the last bar of the last two-step on the programme. There was a burst of laughter and applause, and twenty voices raised a protest.

"Oh, say! How short that was!"

"Bert and I had only just got into it."

"Do give us a repeat—just once!"

"Don't be mean, Wiggins."

"Let 'er rip, pi–o–an–o!"

"Ang–core! Ang–core!"

The professor looked up at his fiddler.

"What do you say, Chris?"

"Give 'em one more turn."

"No 'elp for it. You needn't toon, me boy."

Christie smiled, and bent forward to touch the A on the piano.

"You're too partic'lar," said Professor Wiggins.

"I've got to listen to myself," protested Christie.

"I never listen to my music," said Wiggins.

"No, or you'd be deaf," muttered his First Violin.

When the encore waltz was over he laid down his fiddle and bow, making a slight sound, half a sigh, half a hiss, between his teeth, and vigorously rubbed his right arm. Then he pushed back the limp lock of hair that straggled over his forehead and rose to his feet.

"Now, Professor Wiggins, you must come right along and have your supper," said Mrs. Grinstead, bustling up in her white apron. "Folks have ben chewin' up the victuals all night, but you and your young man ain't swallered a bite since you came."

The professor bowed his acceptance of the invitation, then glanced down at the yellow keyboard of the piano.

"Your pianner wants toonin', Mrs. Grinstead," he said; adding, with a touch of pride, "Most of 'em do after a night with me. I've got a very powerful touch. Now, Chris!"

The young fiddler, who had been packing his violin into its shabby leather case, straightened his back and shook his head.

" Guess I'll be moving off, Professor," he said. " It's getting rather early, you know."

" You ain't never walkin' into town ! " exclaimed Mrs. Grinstead.

" Yes, I am, unless anybody'll give me a boost," said Christie.

Mrs. Grinstead meditated for a minute.

" Laceys are goin' back in their wagon, so I'll ask if they can make room for you," and she hurried off in officious kindness to find Mr. Lacey.

" Why, sure ! " said Mr. Lacey, thus appealed to. " Mar and me fill up the front seat, and the boys and girls snuggle down in the straw behind. There's our four, and Billy Haskott, and Walter Smith and his two sisters. The young man will have to sit right at the back and kind o' fix his legs outside, but I guess he won't make no fuss about that ? "

Christie gratefully accepted the offer, expressing his willingness to fix his legs any way required, short of detaching them from his body, to suit the convenience of his fellow-passengers.

By the time he had swallowed the cup of oyster soup that Mrs. Grinstead's hospitality would not suffer him to refuse, Mr. Lacey's wagon was announced as waiting at the door. The young people were already snuggling in the straw when Christie appeared, violin-case in hand, with his cap pulled down to his eyebrows, and the collar of his old fur coat buttoned up to his ears.

It was a stormy night. An eager wind whistled through the maples, and the sky was lowering with black rain-clouds.

Christie quickly took his place, occupying as little room as possible by dangling his legs, according to agreement, over the back of the wagon. It was too dark for him to distinguish his companions, and they did not make any effort to include him in their merry talk.

The lantern held by young John Grinstead and the

lamplight in the windows of the farm gleamed in the distance, like splashes of yellow mist, gradually melting away. The wheels of the wagon dragged in the soggy road, big clumps of mud falling away at every turn with a soft, clinging splash.

The trees and undergrowth on either side seemed to close together after the wagon had passed through, forming a wall of shadows, while dripping branches, shaking overhead, now and again flicked them with light, icy-cold drops of water.

Christie shivered, conscious of almost unendurable weariness. His right shoulder and arm ached, little dull pains quivering from his wrist to his collar-bone, seeming to be dispatched from, and return to, the muscles of his upper arm.

He was annoyed with himself for being unable to take his part in the conversation and laughter of his companions, regardless of the fact—not from any dullness of perception, but from innate modesty—that they ignored his presence.

"If I were worth noticing, they would notice me," he thought. "It is my own fault that not one of them has spoken a word to me since we left the farm."

After a mile or two, however, his mood changed.

The gloom and heaviness of night lifted, as his eyes grew accustomed to its literal darkness, and he could distinguish different trees in the wall of shadows closing behind them. Exhaustion was succeeded by a sensation of pleasant ease; his nerves became still, and the little quivers of pain less frequent. He forgot his fellow-travellers. The sound of their voices mingled, like words without meaning, in the sighs of the wind and the oozing of the wheels through the mud.

He saw, for the first time that night, the beauty and charm of the ballroom at the farm, reproduced in his imagination from the impression it had made, although he was unconscious of it at the time, on his singularly retentive memory. It grew, like a picture, out of the black

landscape. He saw that the common oil-lamps cast a soft, alluring light ; that Professor Wiggins' music, for all its noise, was full of delightful gaiety ; that the men, in spite of rough clothes and often uncouth manners, were frank, dear fellows—splendid fellows—and the girls were all pretty in their different ways.

He heard the echo in his brain of his own violin, but the jingling polka or monotonous waltz had evolved into a mysterious melody ; he could not interpret its meaning, but it expressed all the young desires, beautiful day-dreams, vague night-dreams, fair illusions, of his strange, but uneventful life.

Listening long to this inner music, Felix Christie suddenly remembered that his drudgery of years was nearly over. He had not fully realized it until that minute.

For seven years, since he was a boy of thirteen, he had belonged, body and soul, to such mean masters as the little English piano-player. He had taught him all he knew, paid him ill, and worked him unceasingly at every dance, entertainment, and concert given in the town of Mapleville.

Christie had been a willing slave so far, but the time was rapidly drawing near when he would be able to go away—to study, to read, to make music—to seek his fortune in the new old world over the sea.

At the thought of it the vivid mental picture of the dance at the farm faded away, and he saw, in the firs and the pines, the towers and roofs of a mighty city ; he heard, in the wild west wind, the murmur of its countless tongues ; the distant lights of a little Canadian town flared into the lamps of crowded streets, reflected in the red glow of an angry sky.

So the old wagon slowly drew near to the end of its journey. Big splashes of rain began to fall, and the boys and girls in the straw fell silent, cold, irritable, and tired out. But Felix Christie, gazing with wide, sleepless eyes into the darkness surrounding him, saw it all transformed—wrapped in the bright, misty veil of romance.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTIE'S HOME

THERE was a faint light glimmering in an upper window of the small, wooden house where Felix Christie lived.

He saw it in the distance when Mr. Lacey stopped his wagon, for him to alight, at the corner of the street. The little wooden house was the last of the uneven row, surrounded by a small plot of unfenced land.

The flicker of the solitary lamp might have been supposed to promise a welcome, but he gave an involuntary sigh as he approached, and the rapt expression of his face, fresh from his day-dreams of the night, changed.

He tried the handle of the door, but discovering that it was bolted, tapped softly but persistently, putting his ear close to the panel to listen.

His mother, the only other occupant of the house, had fallen asleep on the previous night, and he had been kept outside, on returning from a performance at the opera-house, for three-quarters of an hour.

On the present occasion, however, he had only waited a couple of minutes before there was the sound of the bolt being withdrawn.

"Is that you?" asked a voice from within.

"Of course it is, mother—it's all right," he replied.

The door was then opened a very little way—there is always something mean and inhospitable about such an opening—and he slipped into the house.

There was a woman standing in the narrow passage, wearing a long dressing-gown, or wrapper, of the shade of maroon that always looks dirty, with her hair twisted into

a tight knot at the back of her head and into two small horns, with curling-pins, over the forehead.

She had a small lamp in her right hand, shading it with her left, and she looked, in the dim light, extraordinarily tall and spare ; a haggard, thin-lipped woman, with black eyes under black brows.

Christie put down his violin-case and hung up his fur cap. He stooped down to look through the tiny mica window of the stove at the last embers of a fire within.

" My word ! It's awful cold, mother. You forgot to look after the dampers before you went to bed," he said, and put out his hand to touch her. " Say ! You're nearly frozen ! "

" I ain't been to bed, Felix," she answered.

" Why not ? " he exclaimed. " What's the sense in your sitting up night after night ? It always makes me unhappy to think of you. I shouldn't be scared of leaving the door unbolted myself, but as you don't like it, I do wish you'd let me have a key."

" No, Felix ! " answered the woman, sternly. " As long as you live in this house you've got to act decent and respectable."

" But there's nothing indecent or not respectable in a door-key, mother," said Christie, with a smile.

She folded her thin lips tightly together and did not reply. It was an old subject of dispute between them. He looked at her appealingly for a second, then shrugged his shoulders and changed the subject.

" Don't you wait up any longer, mother," he said. " I'll just get something to eat and then go to bed myself."

" No, Felix ! " she said again in the same hard voice. " I ain't so sleepy that I need neglect my dooty."

" Oh, mother ! I can get a bit of bread and butter for myself," he said, following her into the dark, stone-floored kitchen. " It's nothing whatever to do with your duty."

" I b'lieve I know my dooty, Felix, without coming to you to learn me."

She put her lamp down on the well-scrubbed table and proceeded to spread a clean cloth on one side, while Christie, shivering although he still wore his coat buttoned to his chin, watched her nervously. She fetched a plate from a cupboard, neatly covered over with a clean napkin, on which was a small portion of cold meat. Then she went for the loaf, then for a pat of butter on a saucer, then for some pieces of cheese, then for a bottle of pickles, and finally for a knife and fork.

"What a lot of trouble you give yourself, mother!" burst out the young man, at last sitting down to the table. "Just a bit of bread would have done, or some cold pie in my fingers."

"I never did hold with eating like a pig!" observed Mrs. Christie, and she pulled up a chair to the opposite side of the table.

"What will you take yourself, mother?"

"Nothing, but I'll visit with you, Felix, while you eat."

"I wish you wouldn't!" he exclaimed, throwing down his knife and fork. "It's nearly morning, mother, and you always get up at six. Do leave me alone. I'd rather look after myself."

"I'm only waiting to put up the dishes, Felix."

"Oh, mother, you beat the band!" he cried, laughing in spite of his irritation and fatigue. "Leave them on the table till the morning. It's only a knife and fork and a plate!"

"I've never left my kitchen in a muss yet, and I don't mean to begin," said Mrs. Christie.

He would have laughed again, but meeting her eyes in the full light of the lamp, changed his mind.

She was a woman for whom the trifling incidents of life were coloured by the deep gloom of her inner thoughts.

Obstinate and repressed, self-contained and firm, she had little sense of proportion and less of humour; her temper was morose, and, at rare intervals, violent; she was cordially disliked by neighbours and acquaintances;

there was not a man or woman in the town who thought of her as a friend, and if ever she did a generous deed—by stealth as if it were something to be ashamed of—the recipient of her kindness always shrank from the hard words that accompanied it.

A New England woman of old Puritan stock, she had come to the little Canadian town with Felix in the second year of her widowhood. She had a little money, no one knew how much, and had always lived in the same small wooden house.

She had belonged, originally, to the sect known as "Hard-shell Baptists," but left them, in consequence of a quarrel with the minister, to join the larger and more energetic body of Methodists.

One of Felix's earliest and most vivid recollections was in connexion with this change in his mother's views.

There was a Methodist revival in the town, meetings being held in a chapel close to the Christies' house. His mother, at first scornfully, but soon with a strange enthusiasm, attended these meetings, giving her little boy into the care of a good-natured neighbour.

It was one of the older children, at the house where he was sent to visit during his mother's long absences from home, who had discovered that a stolen view of a Methodist revival meeting was an entertainment worth some trouble to obtain.

Felix remembered being dragged, in darkness and through long grass, to one side of the chapel, accompanied by several other little boys, and lifted on to a pile of stones to peep, at risk of discovery, through an open window.

He remembered his feeling of disappointment, carefully hidden from his leader, while fully appreciating the honour of being included in a forbidden adventure. But he remembered, more clearly than everything else, his mother's share in the meeting.

A hymn was being sung during his peep through the window, all the people swaying backwards and forwards

to the tune, many with closed eyes, as filled with sensuous delight as if the little harmonium were a great organ and the air heavy with incense. Some of the women were crying and muttering to themselves. The minister, beating time gently with a small black book in his hand, led the voices in a deep, melodious baritone, tremulous with feeling.

Opposite to the window, her unconscious face on a level with the child peeping in, sat Mrs. Christie, singing.

He had never heard her sing any song in his life, not even a lullaby, and he could only believe she was singing then by the slight motion of her lips. Her bonnet was pushed back, showing her hair, which at that time was curly and abundant; her cheeks were flushed, her eyes wide and bright, and her bare hands outspread upon her breast.

The strangeness of her attitude and expression as she bent forward, wholly absorbed, wholly forgetful of other eyes, made an extraordinary impression on the unseen child.

He never spoke of it. There were times when it slipped out of his thoughts for months, and even years, but now and again the old recollection would sweep over him and set him wondering—wondering—what were the secret springs of the passion he had seen, without understanding, in her face that night.

Had it been only religious zeal he would have found the riddle easier to solve, but he felt that the hysteria of the revivalist meeting had reawakened, not caused, an emotion so alien to her nature.

It was a long time since he had given a thought to the riddle, but suddenly, as he sat at the table eating his hasty supper after the dance at Grinstead's Farm, it flashed into his mind.

He looked at her stern profile, in the glow of the lamp, and saw, as distinctly as if it were only yesterday, the hair pushed back from the young forehead, the bright colour, the singing lips, the hands outspread on the breast.

"Mother! Will you be sorry when I go away? Will

you miss me ? " he said, speaking impulsively, surprised at himself directly the words were out.

She stooped a little to look at him beneath the shade of the lamp. He had learned, as a child, to repress himself in her company, never to give or ask for caresses, and when the age of babyhood gave place to the indifference of the boy, she had ruled him by force, with occasional and strange lapses into excessive indulgence.

His old fear of her, outgrown as it was, made him colour under her gaze now, but his eyes looked steadily into her own. He thought, not for the first time, how good it would be for a fellow to have a friend and sympathizer in his mother.

" Shall I miss you ? ' She repeated his words, grasping the edge of the table with her hands. " Miss you, Felix ? Oh, my God——"

He sprang to his feet and caught her in his arms as she made a sudden movement towards him.

She was a tall woman, taller than the youth ; he felt suddenly small and helpless in her grip ; she pushed his face back from her shoulder, and strained his hair away from his forehead with the palms of her hands, looking at him devouringly, the difficult tears starting to her eyes.

" Why—mother—— ! " he exclaimed, in utter surprise.

Caressing his hair, she pressed his face against her heart, rocking him backwards and forwards, not gently, but with a wild, almost fierce, embrace.

After a few seconds he drew himself away to look at her, amazed, still clasping her round the waist.

" I won't go to the old country, mother," he said. " What's the odds ? I'd just as soon stop here, but I never thought you wanted me."

Mrs. Christie, recovering her self-possession as quickly as she had lost it, pushed him away, but still kept one hand on his hair.

" You said that—for all the world—like your father, Felix ! "

It was years since she had spoken of his father. The very word was half a mystery to the boy. He had never seen a portrait of his father, or known of his mother receiving any communication from her own people in New England.

Felix Christie had many faults, but he was unusually devoid of curiosity. His absolute indifference to his mother's history at this time of his life struck him, in later years, as not unnatural, callous as it was, when he remembered the coldness and reticence of her disposition.

"Do I often remind you of my father?" he asked eagerly, seizing the opening she had given him.

Mrs. Christie turned her back, and scraped the crumbs off his empty plate on to a piece of paper. He moved a little nearer, looking at her helplessly. Her emotion of only a few minutes before seemed inexplicable. The expression he knew so well, like a hard and disagreeable mask, had returned to her face.

"Mother," he said appealingly, "don't you want me to go to England? I do wish you'd talk to me about it."

"I don't know—I don't care!" she answered. "Sometimes I want you to go, sometimes I don't. I'm sick of it all. I'm sick of living. Don't stand there, starin' at me!"—with a stamp of the foot, "It's nearly day. Why don't you go to your bed? Pray to be forgiven for the devil's work you've been doin' this night."

"Why, mother, I never meant to give you any pain——" he began, mistaking her meaning.

She looked at him coldly.

"I'm not thinkin' of myself, boy, but of all the young fools who've been dancin' along the road to perdition to the tune of your fiddle."

He said no more, knowing his mother's views on the fiddle and dancing too well for argument.

He got his own little lamp off the mantelpiece, lighted it, and bade her good night. She only nodded in reply. At the door he glanced over his shoulder, but she was

putting the chairs back against the wall and took no notice.

As his steps receded on the stairs Mrs. Christie looked towards the door, where he had stood, listening to the sound. When she heard his door shut, and was certain of being unheard, she sat down by the table, covered her face with her hands, and began to moan, deeply and persistently, as if it were an effort, but also an indulgence, not beyond her control had she chosen to exert it.

Long after Felix was asleep and dreaming, in his little cell of a room, the passion-wrecked woman sat in the same place, making the same sound, with her head down upon the table and her hands clenched over her tearless eyes.

CHAPTER III

YOUTH

IT was Professor Wiggins, of the Borough, who had filled Christie with a longing to study in England. The professor was not the kind of man whom anybody would have expected to fire a youth with ambition.

His elemental knowledge of music was backed by unbounded energy and overweening belief in his own talents. He called himself a composer, but grandly ignored harmonics and the laws of composition, while his knowledge of time was peculiar and characteristic. To fully appreciate his methods, it was necessary to hear him giving a music-lesson.

He was always unpunctual, but met remonstrances with the bland assurance, "If the roof falls in, you shall have your *h*our!" So he laid his watch on the table before allowing the pupil to begin, and stopped the performance, if it were in the middle of a bar, at exactly the right minute. He did not encourage exercises—with the exception of what he called "the schomatic scale," that he was never tired of playing himself, tilting the music-stool first to the left and then to the right as he thumped his way from bass to treble—but favoured lengthy pieces with variations.

Most of these pieces were of the days of Professor Wiggins' youth. He had brought them from England, apparently his only possessions, and they were very useful as occupying much of his pupils' time, being looked upon as the classical foundation of their musical studies.

"The Battle of Prague" was one of these classics. "The Maiden's Prayer" was another. The song of

" Alice, where art thou ? " turned into a solo of eleven pages, was a great favourite. The approach and passing of " The Turkish Patrol " gave intense satisfaction to parents, praise being given to youthful players that was really due to the loud and soft pedals.

The professor's greatest favourite, his own masterpiece, was called " The Pastoral," and introduced themes to illustrate the crowing of cocks, barking of dogs, whistling of happy peasants, cackling of geese, and even—considered an exquisite touch of humour—the grunting of an old pig in the bass, accompanied by the squeaking of her little family in the treble.

Felix Christie listened to these musical efforts with wonder and amusement. He could not understand his friend's delight in them, but he only expressed his real opinion when the professor urged him to attempt the realism of " The Pastoral " on the violin.

" No, sir ! " he said, with decision. " It's bad enough to play dances for hours at a stretch, but I'm not going to turn my fiddle into a farmyard."

The opera-house at Mapleville was a square, one-story building, with a seating capacity, to quote Professor Wiggins, " of two hundred and fifty comfortable, and over three hundred familiar."

The proprietor and manager, who had known and taught Christie music long before the advent of Wiggins, was an old French Canadian, named Paul Batiste, who played the violin himself.

A quaint, quiet, well-bred old fellow, this Monsieur Batiste ; an old bachelor, living by himself in a tiny wooden house lost in the shadows of a wide verandah.

He had grandiose ideas about his opera-house, with its slip of a stage and six oil-lamps for footlights. The walls were decorated from his own designs—scrolls bearing quotations from Shakespeare, held by figures, heavily draped, representing Fame, Music, Art, and Poetry.

The work had been executed by a local artist, with good

intentions, but little knowledge of drawing. They must have been ghastly figures when fresh from the paint-brush, but after a few years their staring faces and bodiless drapery became cracked and hazy.

The townspeople were always saying that Monsieur Batiste ought to have them restored, but the old fellow was too wise to touch the fading walls, except to renew at intervals the words on the scrolls.

On one occasion when Christie, who had been accustomed to these works of art all his life, voiced the general opinion that they were getting very dirty, Monsieur Batiste deigned to break the silence he had always maintained on the subject.

"You are foolish and thoughtless in what you say, *mon enfant*," he said, with the quaint inflexion of the French province of his birth. "My frescoes were poor at the beginning, but the lofty thoughts with which I planned them were not unworthy of the Arts they are supposed to represent. The artist's feeble hands obscured these thoughts, but—*grâces au bon Dieu*—the strong hands of the artist who turns the pale tints of spring into the rich glow of autumn, the artist Time, has mellowed the faulty colour and softened the poor perspective. Imagination must amend them. Besides, it is a fact," he concluded, with a twinkle in his eyes, "that many a poor picture turns into a very fine work when it becomes old and dirty enough for critics to discover its merits."

"That is a long time for the artist to wait for appreciation," said the boy.

"The wise artist does not expect to be appreciated until after his death," rejoined Monsieur Batiste.

"But that's too late!" exclaimed Christie.

"*Cela!* It is the way of the world, nevertheless," said Monsieur Batiste.

Christie could not argue the point. He knew nothing of Art, artists, or the ways of the world.

It was Batiste who taught him music and sold him the

violin, paid for by small weekly instalments, on which he had practised so persistently from his twelfth year.

All the money he had earned, in the opera-house or as violinist in Professor Wiggins' orchestra, had long been hoarded to pay for his journey to England. How he was to live when he got there, until he became a successful violinist, was still a problem to be solved.

Mrs. Christie, who had originally treated the scheme with silent contempt, promised to send him five dollars a month, and seemed, at times, almost anxious for him to be gone. But five dollars a month, even when they were changed into golden English sovereigns, was a very small amount to pay for board, lodging, and lessons.

"I must look out for a 'sit.,'" said Christie. "There must be plenty of work to be done in a town like London."

"Golden opportunities, me boy!" replied Professor Wiggins. "You must get into an orchestra at one of the music-'alls, or something of that sort."

"I guess it's easy enough to get acquainted with the musicians over there, same as it would be for a stranger landing up in Mapleville," said Christie, in the innocence of his heart.

"Of course it is!" agreed Professor Wiggins. "I can give you introductions to a dozen leading men in my own line of business."

"A dozen professors?" asked the boy, dazzled at the prospect.

His friend hesitated and scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Well, p'raps not quite so many as that; not all of 'em full-fledged professors," he confessed. "Now, let me see, I can introduce you to a friend of mine in Clerkenwell, who keeps a music-shop. Splendid soloist on the cornet! He's a very good business indeed. Fine connexion! Then there's another man I know who teaches the banjo and mandolin, and there's a pal of mine attached to one of the biggest firms in London—pianoforte-makers—he's a reg'lar musician to the tips of his boots. Tuning's

his speciality. He won't take out his fork under five-and-six. He's a swell, I can tell you, me boy, and resides with his family in the Waterloo Road. I believe," concluded the professor impressively, " he's taken a high degree at one of the foreign colleges. I recollect when he went to Paris for a week. He won't make use of his title in business, but he's what we call a ' Mus Doc.' "

" What does that mean ? " asked Christie.

He knew that the general practitioner, the druggist, and the veterinary surgeon in Mapleville were all called " Doc," but the word " Mus " puzzled him. Professor Wiggins explained.

" Are you a Mus Doc yourself ? " asked Christie.

" In a manner of speaking, but not exactly," replied the frank professor, in a tone that implied that he could have been one had he cared enough about it.

" Do you think your friends will help me to get a job ? " asked his admiring pupil.

" I'm sure of it ! " said Wiggins, with confidence. " You must go straight to the places I tell you when you land up in London."

Monsieur Batiste, if not quite as sanguine as the little Englishman, shared his faith in Felix Christie's capability.

Felix impressed everybody with whom he came in contact, even in his boyhood, with the latent possibilities of his undeveloped character. He did it unconsciously, for he was undemonstrative and rarely talked about himself to strangers or friends. He was absolutely devoid, at this time, of what is called the artistic temperament, and his love of music was indicative of a side of his nature that had found, so far, no other outlet.

Music, for its own sake, was not a passion with him. It never had been. He worked at it so ardently because it was the only medium he knew for the expression of his vague, dawning emotions and subtle, suggestive thoughts.

His only education had been at the public school, practical and sound as far as it went, but uninspired ; his ideas

of religion were bounded by the walls of a Methodist chapel ; he had read few books ; he was no fool, and could hold his own with boys of his own age in strength and will, but his secluded life and hours of practice and hard work had kept him singularly fresh, unspoilt, pure in mind and heart.

His mother's attitude was the only thing that really troubled Christie, when the time drew near for his departure, for he could not understand it.

She had bought and made, without consulting him, a goodly store of underclothing, and, again without allowing him a word in its selection, a large trunk for his journey.

She either refused to discuss his plans altogether, or made such very discouraging prophecies about his future life that the poor boy dreaded to broach the subject. He was therefore amazed to learn, from a neighbour, that she had actually boasted of his laudable ambition, the precise words being reported: "I hate a pack o' soft boys who daren't put their noses outside their mar's front door. Felix is none o' that sort, thank the Lord!" Spice was added to the remark by the fact that the neighbour's sons happened to be home-keeping youths.

When Felix ventured to thank her for speaking for him with such unusual warmth, she flatly denied that the words had been uttered.

Felix tried to find out her financial position; beyond knowing that the little house was her own property, he was ignorant of her money affairs. He had gladly offered, when first Monsieur Batiste engaged him to play at the opera-house, to contribute to the household expenses, but Mrs. Christie had indignantly refused to take a cent out of his earnings.

"I ain't come down so low that my own boy has got to pay for his board!" she had declared, and thrown back the bill he had thrust, proudly and nervously, into her hand.

The words had hurt and angered him. The anger soon passed away. The hurt remained.

Although Mrs. Christie was not a woman to encourage

friendly intercourse, she received and paid occasional visits. Her son knew that in case of illness or trouble he could rely on the members of the chapel to do their best for her, for whenever there was illness or trouble in the houses of other people Mrs. Christie was the first—not to offer consolation, but strenuous advice and practical aid. If the invalids shrank, as they always did, from her hard hands and doses of physic, their relations were grateful for her jellies and broths.

Felix had decided to travel steerage, spending as little money as possible, by a ship sailing from Montreal to Liverpool. Professor Wiggins, who knew a great deal about steerage passages considering that he always boasted of travelling first-class, gave him endless instructions anent his comfort and convenience.

"Always look after Number One, me boy!" was the professor's rule of life reduced to a single sentence.

Felix Christie listened to him silently, with his eyes, so slow to change their expression and so steady in their gaze, fixed on his round, red little face. He felt he would not be sorry to say good-bye to Professor Wiggins.

Monsieur Batiste gave him no definite advice.

"You will discover many strange things in the world beyond the maples," he said. "But I beg you to remember, my good Felix, that what you seek you will find—perhaps! *Eh bien*, the best things only are worth the seeking."

"Happiness? Success? Fame?" hazarded the youth.

"In one word, Illusion," said Monsieur Batiste.

"Then I ought to have said Truth?" said Christie.

"Or Beauty, the flower of Truth," said Monsieur Batiste.

"Where shall I find it?" asked Christie.

The old French-Canadian twisted the stiff point of his grey moustache.

"Very probably, at first, in the eyes of a woman, Felix."

Felix laughed and shook his head.

"I shall have no time to think of women," he said.

"Of course not—music is your only mistress," said Monsieur Batiste dryly. "But it is worth while remembering, although it can have no personal application to yourself, that women are our touchstones, my good Felix, and in our treatment of them is the proof of our metal, spurious or real, bright or tarnished."

"Then your final advice, Monsieur Batiste, is——" and Christie waited for it.

"Keep your fine temper and your fine health," said Monsieur Batiste. "Never lie, and never eat or drink too much. That is the most important of all. Every man's habits and conduct are shown, sooner or later, in his personal appearance, and personal appearances are not deceptive."

It was not until his last day at home that Mrs. Christie, having apparently been oblivious of his preparations, talked to her son of the coming departure.

"I presoom you'll send me a card on your arrival, Felix," she said, as if he were going away for a night or two.

"Of course I shall write to you, mother."

"I also presoom you will not neglect your religious dooties," continued Mrs. Christie, as if she were reciting a disagreeable lesson.

"I'll make inquiries about the chapels directly I get to London," Felix assured her.

Mrs. Christie waited a minute to cut the currant pie—they were having dinner—before she continued the lesson.

"I guess you know that London is a den of iniquity and the home of vice—it don't need no sugaring, Felix." (This applied to the pie, not to London.)

"I guess there are a few good people there, mother," said Christie calmly.

"Maybe," assented Mrs. Christie grudgingly. "But there's no blinkin' the fact that these big cities are a trap for young men. I know what I'm talkin' about. When I was a girl we lived in a big city in New England. I've heard my father and mother discussin' it."

"I thought they died when you were a child?" said Christie.

"They died when I was a great girl nearly out of my teens," said Mrs. Christie severely. "But that's neither here nor there. I want you to take care of yourself."

"Oh, I'll do that, sure," said Felix, passing his plate for another piece of pie.

"Don't go in for gamblin'," she went on. "Nor bettin' on horses, or spendin' your money on poor fools of girls. You ought to be very careful about that, Felix."

She laid down her fork, and her tone changed from vexed lecturing to serious warning. He looked up from his plate in some surprise.

"You can't help it—it isn't your fault—but it's pleased Providence to make you one of those boys that is very dangerous——"

"Oh, mother! Why?" cried Felix.

"You've always acted pretty sensibly, as far as I know," said Mrs. Christie, ignoring his question. "But a time may come when you will be tempted to try your winnin' ways on some young woman."

Felix leaned back in his chair and laughed outright.

"I don't say you'll mean any harm by it, they never do, your sort—at first—but it's so easy, Felix, to spoil a girl's life. Ah, you may laugh at me, but I'm talkin' sense."

"I wasn't laughing at you, mother," he said. "I was laughing at the idea of my own fascination."

Mrs. Christie put her elbow on the table, rested her cheek on her hand, and looked at him thoughtfully. It was an attitude she would have called "idle, lazy lollin'" in anybody else.

"I needn't tell you to work hard, though all you seem fit for is fiddlin'," she went on, "for you've done nothing else since you quit school."

"I think, sometimes, I've worked a bit too hard," said Felix, passing his hand involuntarily over the muscles of his right upper arm.

"Oh, no, you ain't," said Mrs. Christie. "Nobody can work too hard. You needn't be scared about that. I hope you'll go on doing your best in all the luxuries and pleasures of a place like London."

Felix wondered how many luxuries and pleasures he would be able to afford, and smiled again.

"But if anything happens that you can't go on with your music, I hope you'll turn your attention to good, honest, useful work," concluded his mother.

That was the last talk they had together.

In the evening, to Christie's unbounded surprise, a party of his young friends, many of them old schoolfellows, paid a surprise visit to their house, to present him with a farewell gift. It was a roll of new bills to the value of thirty dollars, contained in a pretty purse knitted by one of the girls.

His pleasure and amazement were almost painful. He could only stammer a few sentences of thanks. It was his first attempt at a speech, badly constructed, halting, ineffective, but even Felix Christie, whom the future was to show as a master of words, was never to feel again such pride and gratitude as he felt in the applause of the friends of his childhood.

On the following morning he went away. His mother, who refused to share his breakfast, bustled backwards and forwards from stove to table with corn-cakes hot from the pan. He ate as heartily as he could, to please her, but the food was tasteless, and everything in the little kitchen looked, to his excited eyes, strange and unfamiliar.

His trunk had been sent to the railway station overnight. He had nothing to carry but his overcoat, fiddle-case, and an old leather suit-case, a gift from the Methodist minister, containing necessary clothes for the voyage.

He rose from the table at last, and stood still for a couple of minutes, deliberately committing his surroundings to memory.

First he looked at Mrs. Christie, in her dull lilac stuff gown, stiff and scanty, with a border of crochet at the

bottom of her apron—of a pattern she called pine-apple, he observed—and the collar of her bodice fastened with a cameo brooch of Minerva's head, cracked across the helmet.

Then he looked at the shiny stove ; at the row of lamps, ready to be cleaned, standing upon the mantelpiece ; at the faded patchwork mats on the floor ; at the hard, uncomfortable chairs—it was probably the only house in Mapleville where a rocking-chair was considered a dangerous incentive to idleness ; at the open door of the china-cupboard, giving a glimpse of the best tea-service on a high shelf, and the ordinary dishes neatly arranged below ; at the curtained window, and beyond it the little garden, soft and hazy in the light of opening day.

" There's the bell of the English church, Felix ! " exclaimed Mrs. Christie suddenly. " Don't stand moonin' round and miss your train."

" No, I must get a move on ! Here's my bag and fiddle —and my coat—and I've got my tickets and money all right. Now, is that all ? "

He pretended to ponder over his possessions to gain another minute's grace. He had not fully realized before that he was leaving home, perhaps for years, perhaps for ever.

Mrs. Christie brushed past him to the front door, without looking into his face. She opened it with a steady hand, and the sunshine flooded into the narrow passage, dazzling his eyes.

He put down his bag and coat in a heap at the top of the steps, and, turning, clasped his mother in his arms.

" Well—good-bye ! " was all he said, but she felt his tears on her face.

She kissed him on the cheek, but there was no response to his tenderness in her firm, unbending figure, and her expression was unchanged, set and indomitable, as he let her go.

Christie ran quickly down the steps, biting his lips, and not daring to look round. All the unhappiness of his child-

hood was forgotten, all the discouragement and loneliness of his youth. He felt, for those few seconds, as if he could not go.

Then the wrench was over. A fresh wind swept by; he heard the loud, piercingly sweet song of a bird, high in the air above his head, and he saw that the sky was blue and cloudless.

When he looked round, to wave a last farewell to his mother, she had gone away and the door was shut.

Monsieur Batiste was at the railway station to see him off. The booking clerk, the telegraph operator, and a few other men lounging about the little wooden platform shook him cordially by the hand and wished him God-speed.

Christie felt as if he were going away for a long holiday, irresponsible, light-hearted, in absurdly high spirits.

He laughed and talked with his friends till the minute before the train started, then he jumped on the step, stooped forward, and gave his hand, last of all, to the old French Canadian.

"Adieu, my Felix!" said Monsieur Batiste. "This is the greatest day of your life. Enjoy it! Adieu! Adieu!"

"It is only the beginning, old friend!" cried Christie, as the train started.

"Good luck, Chris!" shouted the men on the platform.

"God be with you!" said Monsieur Batiste. "Heaven bless you!"

Christie pulled off his cap and waved it over his head.

Soon the little crowd he had left behind became a blur of indistinct figures, only to be recognized by the flutter of Monsieur Batiste's big white handkerchief.

Christie did not look for a seat even then, but stood on the little platform at the end of the train, bare-headed, with his eyes wandering over the hills and woods, till the town of Mapleville had faded, like a mirage, out of land and sky.

CHAPTER IV

A NIGHT ON BOARD

CHRISTIE sat on the lowest deck of the ship, on the fourth day out, staring at the sea.

He was sheltered from the wind. His cap was pulled down to his eyebrows, his arms were folded on his chest, and there he sat in the same place for three hours, only shifting his position now and again to light a new cigarette.

He was deliberately studying the sea, as an artist might study it who intended, at some future time, to paint a seascape from memory.

He was not thinking of the endless changes of colour in waves and sky, or the high road of foam behind and the unbroken green plain in front, or the cruelty of the ocean, or its blue depths—all the obvious thoughts of a first voyage—but of the ships which had sailed in ancient days and of brave old mariners, for Christie had always, in a meandering way, told himself stories in the background of his mind.

It is the habit of many children, but usually left behind at the end of the first decade. Christie had never entirely lost the childish pleasure, although it had long taken the form of speculating and wondering within himself about the lives of real people, and weaving romances, or amusing tales to suit his fancy, of any man or woman who attracted his attention.

He was, as was shown by his indifference to the facts of his mother's early life, absolutely incurious, but none the less interested, keenly and intensely, in his fellow-beings.

It seemed months to him, instead of days, since he left home.

The beginning of the voyage had been very stormy, but he was a good sailor and quickly adapted himself to his surroundings.

There were many children in the steerage, and Christie, with the good temper of good health, made himself very popular with the harassed fathers and mothers. He would have nothing to do with mere babies, regarding them with the nervous dread of breakages and masculine dislike of infantine habits and ways peculiar to young men, but small children—good, bad, noisy, quaint, common—any type and style of little boy or girl amused and delighted him.

There were several girls and two or three young men who were quick to follow his example, and long before the middle of the voyage the people in the steerage were just as friendly, and generally much more agreeable to one another, than was the case with the small company of first-class passengers.

Mr. Henry Pargetter came to this conclusion as he leaned over the rail, on the upper deck, watching the scene below.

Christie had risen at last from his long contemplation of the sea, and was romping with some little boys; half a dozen men were standing round a party at whist, smoking and criticizing the play, while a group of women were sitting on mats on the deck, chatting, and occasionally bursting into shrieks of laughter.

The sea was smooth and the wind had dropped, after three days of storm.

Mr. Pargetter, as everybody at the captain's table, where he sat, had been informed, was making his thirty-second voyage. The Atlantic generally bored him, except in one particular: it proved the perfection of Pargetter-Smith boilers. He was senior partner in the well-known firm of Pargetter, Smith, and Company, boiler manufacturers, Newcastle-on-Tyne. A prosperous, clever, self-made man, never ashamed—a little too proud, in fact, to suit his

family—of mentioning that he knew what it meant to wield a hammer ; a self-contained, ambitious man, warm-hearted and boastful, generous and kind ; shrewd, but not grasping ; vain, but not ridiculous ; a man built on a large scale, literally and figuratively—on the scale of the Pargetter-Smith boilers, as Felix Christie once said—with a shock of sandy hair, streaked with grey ; honest, watery blue eyes ; a short, but ragged beard ; and wrinkled, red, weather-beaten skin.

He smiled as he watched the romping boys, thinking of his own boys at home, and laughed as he had not laughed all the voyage when they rolled over in a heap, a ball of struggling arms and legs until Christie could disentangle them.

" There's a good-looking young fellow, the one in the grey cap," observed Mr. Pargetter to the doctor, who strolled up at that minute and also leaned over the rail.

" You're right," said the doctor. " He's a Canadian. I was talking to him this morning when I went below. We get some strange people in the steerage, Mr. Pargetter. It appears that he is a professional violinist, going to England to study music."

" You don't say so ! " exclaimed Mr. Pargetter, looking at Christie with increasing interest. " Tell me some more about him."

" I'm afraid that is all I know," said the doctor. " It took me some time to extract so much information. He seems a modest, simple fellow. Rather out of the common, I should say."

" Then I suppose you'll cultivate his acquaintance ? " said Mr. Pargetter.

" I don't think so. I haven't much time for that sort of thing," said the doctor, and he strolled off again.

" I'm more fortunate just now. I've got lots of time for that sort of thing," thought Mr. Pargetter.

A professional violinist, travelling steerage, appealed to his sympathies. He thought of his own early days, when a word of encouragement from such a man as himself,

Henry Pargetter, would have helped him to bear many hardships. He would have preferred the young Canadian to be a struggling engineer, even though he appreciated the fact that musicians are very necessary as a class of people for the Pargetters of society to patronize.

Accordingly, in the laziest of all lazy hours on board ship, between tea and dinner, the boiler manufacturer descended, like Ulysses, into the unknown lower regions. He had already marked his man from the upper deck, pacing backwards and forwards in the restricted area allotted to steerage passengers.

Mr. Pargetter, who never hesitated in any undertaking whether it were great or small, paused at the bottom of the steep steps until Christie was within hearing. Then he greeted him with a wave of his big hand, holding a big cigar.

"Good evening! Pleasant day after such stormy weather, eh?"

"Very pleasant," agreed Christie, thinking he must be an officer of the ship.

Mr. Pargetter joined him in his walk. They were nearly of the same height, but the young Canadian looked like a shadow beside the heavy, broad frame of the Englishman.

"I've been hearing about you from Dr. Gavin," said Mr. Pargetter.

"Why? There's nothing the matter with me!" exclaimed Christie, supposing that the only interest that the doctor could possibly take in him must be as a "case."

"Oh yes, there is!" said his companion, puffing away at the big cigar.

"I've never been real sick in my life."

"My dear boy, you're suffering from Ambition in an advanced stage," said Mr. Pargetter, vastly amused at his little joke. "You've got all the symptoms, and you're just at the dangerous age. You've left home—perhaps you've bolted, I ask no questions—and you've made up your mind to fiddle your way to fame and fortune."

Christie joined in the laugh. He looked with pleasure

at his unknown friend. There was something very likeable in the broad face and bluff manner of the man.

"Guess you're right!" he exclaimed. "But I haven't bolted from home. No, sir! I'm going to the old country to study."

"Many friends on our side?"

"Not yet."

"Know much about the life in England?"

"Can't say I do."

"Any definite plans for the future?"

"Some."

They had paced the bit of deck twice during this little examination, and swung round again for the third time. Mr. Pargetter spoke again.

"I'm not at all inquisitive"—he was, very—"but I always take an interest in young fellows starting out in the world. I have boys of my own. A troop of 'em! My eldest son went up to Cambridge last year, and the youngest is only a little chap. I shall be glad to know what you mean to do when you get to London. I suppose you're going to London. They all do."

Christie liked him better at every word. He had the gift of making friends, and Mr. Pargetter had the gift of putting boys at their ease.

Christie took out the leather pocket-book which had been Monsieur Batiste's parting gift, and found Professor Wiggins' three letters of introduction: the first to the cornet-player who had a shop in Clerkenwell, the second to the man who taught the banjo and mandolin, and the third to the piano-tuner whom the professor called a "Mus Doc."

"These are the three gentlemen I shall call upon," he explained. "One or another of them is sure to be able to recommend a teacher."

Mr. Pargetter put on his eyeglasses to read the addresses. Professor Wiggins, probably owing to his devotion to deeper studies, wrote a very cramped, ill-educated hand.

" Of course I shall have to get some work," Christie went on, carefully returning the letters to the pocket-book. " But I expect that's easy enough in a place like London I shall go into a store, or something of that sort."

" How can you practise the violin if you're working in a shop ? " asked his companion.

" Mornings and nights," said Christie cheerfully.

" How far advanced are you ? Can you play well ? "

" That's just the question ! " said Christie, with a laugh. " I don't know. I've never heard anybody play who was real good. I can play easy enough, for I've worked at it ever since I was a kid. Professor Wiggins thought I was very fine, but Monsieur Batiste always seemed doubtful, and they were the best judges in the little burgh I come from."

" Perhaps you'll play for me some time ? " said his new friend.

" Sure ! I'd be only too pleased."

At that minute the distant boom of a gong reminded Mr. Pargetter that it was nearly dinner-time. He shook hands with Christie, presented him with one of the big cigars, and departed, promising to see him again.

On the following evening, when he saw Mr. Pargetter leaning over the rail, the young Canadian fetched his violin-case, and, surrounded by a crowd of eager listeners, played a solo in his very best manner.

The boiler manufacturer was no musician, although he often made the original remark that he knew what he liked, and his greatest delight was to hear his daughters " play tunes " on the piano or sing the old melodies in which he could join. It struck him at once that the young Canadian was a ready player, firm and spirited, but he was unable to judge the real quality of his work.

One of the ladies, whom the sound of the violin had attracted to the spot, shook her head at her companion with a pucker of the brows. The companion evidently regarded the performance more favourably.

" Not at all bad," he observed.

" Extraordinary ease, but all wrong ! " said the lady.

" He must be entirely self-taught," said the gentleman.

" Is it promising ? Do you think there are possibilities, eh ? " asked Mr. Pargetter.

" I really can't say," rejoined the lady. " He plays with a certain power, but very undeveloped and elemental. That waltz is enough to prejudice anybody against him."

" It seems to suit the dancers all right enough," said Mr. Pargetter.

Two or three of the girls and young men had begun to waltz.

" I'm afraid you have not discovered a genius in the steerage, Mr. Pargetter," said the lady, with a smile, as she went away.

" I didn't ask her to judge the boy," said the good-natured boiler manufacturer to the people who were left leaning over the rail. " Anybody can see he's only a beginner. What I want to know is this, has he got any special talent ? Is there hope for him in the future ? I suppose he has so much to learn, eh ? "

" I should say he had so much to unlearn," said the doctor.

" That hadn't occurred to me," confessed Mr. Pargetter.

He thought it over, and, on visiting Christie after the dance was over—they had made him play for an hour and a half—repeated the doctor's words to the young Canadian.

" Perhaps he's right," acknowledged the violinist. " But you see I've had to play all this sort of poor stuff to earn money, and it makes you mechanical to scrape away, hour after hour, at jig tunes."

" I'll tell you what I'll do for you," said Mr. Pargetter, after several turns up and down the deck in silence. " I'll give you a note to an old acquaintance of mine, an Italian named Signor Martelli, who has often visited at my house in Newcastle. He's a very fine violinist, or he used to be, and he's just the man to advise you what to do."

" Say ! How good of you ! I don't know how to thank you ! " cried Christie.

" That's all right," said Mr. Pargetter. " I'm something

of a judge of character, my boy, and I liked you from the first. You shall have the address of my London office, and you must look me up. I'm generally in town at the end of the month. Remind me to give you the note to Signor Martelli, if it slips my memory, before we land."

"If every Englishman is as kind as you are——" began Christie.

"They're not!" interrupted Mr. Pargetter. "Most of them forget their own youth. I don't. I'm proud of remembering my early struggles. My father was a working engineer, and brought up a big family on twenty-five bob a week. The first wages I earned was at Eldridge's old engine-shops at Sunderland — they've been shut up for twenty years—and I remember rushing home, on the Saturday morning after I got my job, with three bob and a tanner clutched in my grimy little paw, and bursting out crying with joy and pride in my dear mother's arms. Yes, and I'm not ashamed to remember it. There isn't a man employed in Pargetter-Smith's that don't know that story."

The successful boiler-maker, having once started his autobiography, entertained Christie with many of its early chapters, finding him a particularly good listener.

Backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, they paced on the steerage deck, Christie with his eyes wandering over the waste of waters and the depths of sky, and Mr. Pargetter, smoking one big cigar after another, supremely happy and pleasantly melancholy over his reminiscences.

It was the first of many similar talks. There was a certain effect of sunset, when the clouds looked flat and golden like a burning lake flecked with sails, that was ever after associated in Christie's mind with his first voyage and Henry Pargetter.

Whenever he saw it—over the sea, over the prairies, over the roofs—he could feel the movement of the deck beneath his feet, and the touch of a big shoulder against his own, while he heard, like an echo in his brain, the kind, manly voice of his first English friend.

CHAPTER V

CHRISTIE IN LONDON

FELIX CHRISTIE stood still, to look about him, in the middle of Waterloo Bridge.

Spring was in the air, floating in pale tints from the sky to the river, enveloping the distant shores, and colouring the streets and houses with cold, faint sunlight.

He leaned over the parapet, listening to the noise of the road, and gazing at the dome of St. Paul's rising, like a bubble, out of the grey waters of mist.

The feeling of utter loneliness that had recently possessed him in the busy Strand gave place, as he looked over the water, to a subtle, unexpected pleasure.

He missed the sweep of boughs, the wilderness of shadowy undergrowth, and the presence of wild life, hitherto associated in his mind with the banks of a river, but found a compensation in the fading colour and half-obscure forms of the crowded buildings, in all that the scene suggested of the past, present, and future of the highway of the Thames.

All his old life was forgotten. He was absorbed in his new surroundings and captivated with London, at one time feeling as if he had lived twenty years, instead of two weeks, in the city, at another as surprised and bewildered as on the first day of his arrival.

It was not the glare and noise, the wealth or the size of London that filled him with such strange, almost thrilling emotion ; he was still ignorant of so much that is common knowledge to the born Londoner ; he looked at everything with the clear, but often unseeing eyes of inexperience.

He was very impressionable, but not critical, and wholly unaware of the rapid change and development in his character.

None of these things occurred to his mind, for it is the gift of youth to enjoy, not analyse, and all that Felix Christie realized was a keen, insatiable interest in the new life, an awakening sympathy with all sorts and conditions of people, and a vague sense of the greatness—the wonder—the impersonal power—the Spirit of London.

He had taken a room at the house of Professor Wiggins' friend, the Mus Doc, the letter of introduction to that gentleman proving to be the only one out of the three that Christie had been able to deliver.

The cornet-player in Clerkenwell had moved away, leaving no address. The second friend, who taught the banjo and mandolin, unfortunately did not receive the young Canadian with the cordiality he had expected, but flatly refused to accept the professor's letter, giving him such a bad character in regard to debts and other matters that Christie was glad to escape from the wrath and indignation vicariously bestowed upon himself.

Mr. Poole, or the Mus Doc, who had never dreamed of the title bestowed upon him by the imaginative Wiggins, lived in Waterloo Road. He kept a musical-instrument shop, tuned pianos, and let the upper part of the house. By these means he contrived to support himself, his wife, and a large family of small children.

It was one of the old-fashioned houses, grimy without, dark within, not a hundred yards from the New Cut. The shop-window was divided between the musical instruments and sheet music, displayed outside in good weather, and an odd collection of curiosities, such as bits of old-fashioned jewellery and cracked china, a few prints and engravings, bundles of magazines, strings of beads, some false teeth, old sets of second-hand furs, and dog's-eared novels.

It was a mystery to his friends, as it was to Mr. Poole,

how he managed to pay the rent and feed the family, even when the lodgers and piano-tuning were taken into consideration.

He had known and liked Professor Wiggins, who had never borrowed money from him—for the very good reason that Mr. Poole never had any to lend—and was remembered by the older members of the young family as the funny gentleman who played the piano.

Christie's reception, in consequence, was both kind and cordial. He ate his first meal in London in the Pooles' parlour behind the shop, discussed his prospects, and sought advice about board and lodging.

A hopeful light came into Mrs. Poole's eyes when their visitor asked the question. She was a worn, pale woman of about thirty, with sandy hair and no front teeth.

"What about our top room back?" she said, with a nervous smile, to her husband.

"You can't hardly call that a room," he answered.

"Of course it's only a nattic," she corrected herself.

"Anything would do for me," said Christie.

"It's only a nattic," repeated poor Mrs. Poole. All her friends called her poor. It was an adjective well suited to her appearance and circumstances.

"It's airy," put in the Mus Doc.

"We've got a fairly good 'let' in our top front," she went on, warming a little to the subject. "Of course this attic I mentioned to you is only the back. The front is a young gentleman who draws pictures for the newspapers. Most respectable. He's really a very good 'let,' on the whole, as 'lets' go."

Mrs. Poole's remarks were somewhat incoherent, but her visitor understood, and she meandered on to the accompaniment of the baby in her arms beating the tea-tray with a spoon.

"On our next floor we've a tall, thin widder lady. Of course she's a dressmaker."

Christie wondered whether all tall, thin widow ladies in

England were "of course" dressmakers, but he soon discovered that this was Mrs. Poole's favourite phrase.

"Then on our next floor we've got a young lady and her mamma," she went on. "They're all good 'lets' just at present. Of course we've had our ups and downs, like everybody else. You must expect it with apartments, mustn't you?"

Christie agreed, although he had no experience of the ups and downs of apartments, and expressed a desire to see the top floor back.

Mr. and Mrs. Poole showed him the way. The flight of stairs as far as the drawing-room was covered with bright, clean linoleum belonging to the young lady and her mother who occupied the first set. The widow was responsible for the dingy carpet of the next flight, and the respectable young gentleman who worked for the newspapers had left the remaining stairs without any covering at all.

Mr. Poole had called the back attic airy, but smutty was the adjective that occurred to his guest. There was only one small window, opening on the leads; the walls were covered with an old-fashioned paper of faded blue daffodils on a yellow ground; the furniture consisted of an iron bedstead, a very old, rickety washstand, two chairs, and a big chest of drawers. There was no fire-place.

Christie looked round and whistled. He was thankful that his mother could not see such an apartment.

"Of course a room looks very different when it's clean," said Mrs. Poole. "They want cleaning now and then, rooms do; it's only natural they should."

"I've half a mind to give the ceiling a whitewash," added her husband.

Mr. Poole, like his wife, harped on a favourite phrase. He had half a mind to do so many things, but so rarely a whole mind that very little was ever done.

"Oh, I'll soon fix it up all right," said Christie. "I guess I'll take it. How do you let, by the week or month?"

Terms were arranged on the spot, the only cloud on the horizon being the probability of the gentleman in the front room objecting to the violin ; but, as Mrs. Poole said, if you live in apartments you ought to accustom yourself to incidental unpleasantnesses, and the gentleman must remember that if Mr. Christie's practising was a trial to his nerves by day, Mr. Christie had to put up with the cats by night, so it was all turn and turn about.

That was two weeks before the afternoon when the young Canadian, leaning over Waterloo Bridge, was conscious of the attraction, growing greater day by day, of the old, new city he had just discovered.

He had not yet made use of Mr. Pargetter's note of introduction to Signor Martelli, the violinist, having determined to practise vigorously before doing so.

Waterloo Road was a source of continual curiosity and surprise to him. If its dirt and poverty appalled, its humour was perpetual, and its types of character of unfailing interest.

He liked to watch the men, skilful drivers, hard workers, good-tempered, rough, unconsciously enjoying their labour. He saw that the women, overburdened with cares and spoilt as they were by the cruel hardships of life, retained many of the best qualities of their sex.

He made friends with children — little gutter-snipes, human sparrows—and spoke to beggars with the sympathy, if not the discrimination, that characterized his peculiar studies of London life in later years.

There was a private door to the Mus Doc's house, of which Christie usually availed himself when he was not in the mood for conversation with his landlord or poor Mrs. Poole.

He had written several letters to his mother, but wisely refrained from telling her that he possessed a latchkey, knowing that it was the symbol, in her eyes, of all that was wild and wicked in the life of a young man.

Ascending slowly to the top floor back, Christie met one

of his fellow-lodgers on the stairs, with whom he exchanged a word of greeting.

"Good afternoon!"

"How d'you do?"

"Out for a walk, Miss Boscombe?"

"I'm going out marketing, Mr. Christie."

"Wish you luck!"

"Thanks. Good-bye!"

It was the young lady who occupied, with her mother, the first floor.

A self-possessed young lady, Miss Boscombe, who looked older than her one-and-twenty years. An unattractive young lady to the casual observer, although the reason of this would be far to seek, for she was not plain in features or colouring, and her figure was decidedly pretty; perhaps it was her manner, which was brusque and shy, in spite of the self-possession; or perhaps it was because her very sensitiveness made her assume an indifference to other people's opinions and wishes that concealed her desire to understand them.

A puzzle to herself, but a puzzle that she was far too diffident and modest to consider worth the solving, there were depths of feeling and occasional flashes of wit in Ettie Boscombe that surprised and interested the few with whom she was really intimate.

Her disposition was like her face, apparently placid and quickly known, but really characterized by unexpected lights and shadows, never dull and never obstinate.

It says much for Felix Christie's good taste that he had fallen, not in love, but into friendship with this girl.

A sudden friendship is frequent between men, it occasionally happens between women, but very rarely indeed between a man and a woman.

Christie, even at the inflammable age of twenty, was capable of this feeling, and Miss Boscombe was young

enough to believe that for her, too, friendship would satisfy and fulfil the affection he had already awakened in her heart.

Time, the old judge, would have to prove whether Ettie's belief was right or wrong.

CHAPTER VI

EDWARD MILLIDEW

AS Christie mounted the last flight of stairs, after exchanging a few words with his new friend, he was greeted by the loud voice of another of his fellow-lodgers.

" There you are, Chris ! At last ! I've got something to tell you. Hurry up ! "

The loud voice belonged to poor Mrs. Poole's " good let," Mr. Edward Millidew, who occupied the top floor front.

Christie followed him into his room. Mr. Millidew pushed his friend into the only chair, seating himself on the bed.

All his movements were hurried and nervous, and he spoke quickly, his words tumbling over one another. He was thin and pale, with lank, quite black hair, and bright, big eyes ; his forehead was broad and well shaped ; his mouth mobile, but rather small ; his figure spare and below middle height ; he was too narrow in the chest, but neither insignificant nor mean in appearance, for he held himself well, making the most of his inches.

His small room was littered with newspapers and sketches. There were a great number of photographs on the walls, all of pretty women, ancient and modern ; and several rough shelves of his own carpentry, laden with books.

" Look here, Chris ! " he exclaimed, tearing open a big portfolio that was lying on the pillow of the bed. " I've sold them all ! The whole lot. What do you say to that ? Good money, Chris ! Where do you think they've gone ? Guess ! No, don't guess. You'd never guess right. Buckley's have taken them ! What do you say to that ? "

The name of Buckley's conveyed no idea of his friend's

success to the Canadian. He did not know that Buckley was rapidly evolving into one of the biggest names in the newspaper world of London. Millidew enlightened him in a rapid sentence.

"Buckley's got the 'Orb,' you know, 'Buckley's Weekly' and 'Buckley's Monthly'—all sorts of publications—I can't recollect the names of half of them. What do you think of it, Chris? I shan't get paid till they come out, that's the only drawback."

"I hope you'll be paid well," said Christie.

"All the flat-wash drawings a guinea apiece, and the line drawings half a guinea."

"Is that good pay?"

"Magnificent! I did the whole lot in a week—look here, Chris!"

He jumped up and began to strip his own sketches off the walls, tossing the sheets of paper on to the bed with a criticism for each.

"Good!" "Rotten!" "Well put on the paper." "Fine!" "Too ripe!" "Bit low, eh?" "Thundering good!" "Damned bad!" and so on and so on.

They were all sketches of London scenes, faulty in drawing, brutal in realism, but redeemed now and again by rare touches of humour and pathos.

Christie knew nothing of Art, and Millidew had already won his affection and admiration, but the pictures made him silent. Many were so ugly, a few were so coarse, and the whole series suggested a man utterly different from what he supposed his new friend to be.

Millidew, after a few minutes, noticed his silence. He laughed. Then he looked at his work again, sheet by sheet, frowning a little.

"What's the matter with them, Chris? Too much boose? What's wrong? Look at this old hag and the baby. She lifted up the shade over her black eye, just like that, to stare at me. I did it at Bow Street. I like this little girl. Just my sort—of that sort, you know!

It's a portrait in half a dozen strokes. You shall see for yourself how good it is. I'll introduce you to her some night. I know where she walks. We're old pals."

"I suppose you're a very clever artist, Ned; but why don't you make pictures of better subjects? I think if I were an artist——" he hesitated diffidently, looking at his companion—"I should get tired of all this sort of thing, but you never seem to want a change."

"Of course you're right!" exclaimed Millidew. "I can see you're right; but the worst of it is, old man, I've got the gift of fatal facility. I've no patience to do anything better. I've no ideals. You don't know me yet, Chris! I'm young in years, but old in experience, and mine isn't the kind that makes for wisdom. Don't be angry when you find me out. I'm really exactly like my work—every man is at bottom—but when people care about me they don't believe it."

He laughed at himself. Christie made no answer, but putting aside the drawing he held, folded his arms and looked at his companion with a long, thoughtful gaze. Millidew's face twitched nervously under it and he laughed again.

"Come along, old gut-scraper!" he said, pulling on his overcoat. "Let's go out to dinner. I'll tell you all about Buckley's. I say, Chris, I hate to ask you, but could you lend me some money? You shall have every penny back, I swear, directly I get paid. I've got to settle with old Poole to-night. I promised. He's been kicking up an awful row."

"See here, Ned," said Christie, "I'll settle for you with the Mus Doc. You know that if I let you have the money you won't pay him."

Millidew protested hotly, but Christie, who had not studied his friend of two weeks for nothing, stood firm.

"All right! Have it your own way!" said Millidew at last, as if he were doing Christie a favour. "Come on! Let's go out to dinner."

"I can't; I must practise."

"You were practising all the morning. You're a slave to that infernal fiddle. Come on! Why not? Get up early and practise to-morrow."

"No, sir!" was all Christie answered, making for his own room.

Millidew caught him by the arm, but he wrenched himself away with an exclamation of pain.

"I don't know what's the matter with my muscles," he said half apologetically, "but I can't stand a grip above the elbow."

Millidew laid his hand again on his friend's right arm, testing it.

"Why, it's as flabby as a girl's!" he exclaimed in surprise.

"I know it is," said Christie. "And it's the bowing arm too, so you can be sure there's no lack of work. It goes soft like that sometimes. The muscle seems to slip round, out of place, but it will be all right again directly."

"Of course it will, old boy, when we've had dinner," said Millidew; but Christie only shook his head and escaped into his own room.

He slipped the bolt and waited patiently until his friend, after knocking, shaking the door, cajoling and cursing, departed without him. Then he opened his worn old case and took out his violin.

There was no enthusiasm in his work. The progress struck him as so disproportionate to the drudgery. For the first time in his life he was oppressed by the idea that all his efforts were futile.

One night at a good concert in London had confirmed him in an old suspicion that his musical friends in Mapleville—the choirmaster at the principal church, Professor Wiggins, even Monsieur Batiste—were incapable of real criticism. He had already left them all behind.

It was a fruitless effort, a dull labour, to practise. He felt imprisoned. The sights and sounds of London, un-

heard and unseen as they were in his little attic, drew his mind and heart away.

A stronger emotion than the ordinary desire of youth for leisure and pleasure, although that desire naturally had a place in his thoughts, made him long to throw down his bow and escape.

He felt—too vaguely, strangely, to put into words—that the true work of his life lay beyond the four walls where he was striving to make music. But he played on untiringly, until the light faded, and the strip of sky over the leads had changed from crimson to purple, from purple to black.

Then he laid aside his violin and sat still for a long time, drooping forward, hands lightly clasped between his knees, surrounded by the visionary figures of his imagination, and trying to recall a weird story he had told to himself, and long forgotten, in the days of his lonely childhood.

CHAPTER VII

FRIENDSHIP

SIGNOR MARTELLI, to whom Mr. Pargetter had given Christie a letter of introduction, lived in an old-fashioned house in Regent's Park.

Christie went to see him, by appointment, on the first day of his third week in London.

The famous violinist's house was surrounded by a quaint, vivid garden, the result of much thought and continual care. The paths were paved with mossy stones of different sizes and shapes, shaded by pergolas covered with roses and clematis ; there was an old sundial and stone seats ; a tiny lily pond ; great patches of brilliant blossoms—nasturtiums, pansies, phlox, hollyhocks, larkspurs ; dozens of sunflowers, like sentinels in golden helmets ; a wilderness of evening primroses, lamps of the nights of June ; and boundary hedges of flowering bushes.

The garden captivated Christie. The house amazed him. It was simple and unpretentious ; but the Canadian boy, accustomed to the severe and ugly rooms of his home at Mapleville, considered it a very palace.

He was shy and diffident with Signor Martelli, but the beauty of his surroundings moved him to express his admiration in frank, impetuous words. There was no embarrassment or servility in his attitude towards the show of wealth—too often demanded, too often given—but a genuine pleasure and appreciation in an aspect of life unknown to him.

The great violinist was a man of sixty, but he looked ten, or fifteen years younger, with his erect figure, light step,

smooth hair brushed back from straight brows, and closely trimmed, pointed beard.

His manner reminded Christie of the old French-Canadian Monsieur Batiste. He was cordial and effusive, but it was the cordiality and effusion of a prince, accustomed to charm and be charmed, too dignified to trouble about his dignity, always too courteous to fear discourtesy. He spoke English perfectly, but continually emphasized his words with little expressive gestures of his fine hands.

His praise of Mr. Pargetter was tempered with a smile and shrug of the shoulders.

" A dear fellow ! Strong as a giant, gentle as a woman, but with no more music in him than a broken drum."

Christie was assured that he would be " enchanted " with Mrs. Pargetter and " adore " the children. Signor Martelli had visited several times at the boiler manufacturer's house in Newcastle, the recollection seeming to afford him a certain amusement that he did not particularize to the young Canadian.

After a while he took Christie into the music-room, talking all the time, and smiled indulgently at his guest's quick appreciation of its size and suitability. There were no superfluous ornaments or draperies, and little furniture. The big open windows framed a series of brilliant pictures, the garden in full bloom, while the glare of the sunshine was softened by outer blinds of striped white and green linen.

" Now you must give me the pleasure of hearing you play," said Signor Martelli. " I will ask my son to accompany you."

He rang the bell and sent for his son, who quickly appeared, startling Christie by his extraordinarily strong resemblance to the violinist.

He looked like a young photograph of his father—not wrinkled, a shade fuller in face, hair a little thicker and untouched by grey, a waxed moustache, instead of the neatly cut beard ; the likeness to an early photograph even being suggested by a certain carelessness in dress,

as if the need for preservation and attention to details in appearance had not yet presented itself to the younger man.

He shook hands with the Canadian in exactly his father's manner, as if he were mimicking him, and sat down at once to the grand piano, rubbing his hands together for a few seconds before he began to play.

He made no remark on the piece of music Christie put before him, a solo that had been very popular at Mapleville social gatherings, but smoothed the sheet flat with his left hand and nicked the corners for turning over.

Christie did his very best, feeling nervous for the first time in his life, and glancing now and again at Signor Martelli, who reclined in a big chair, with the tips of the fingers of his right hand touching the tips of his left, his head thrown back, and his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

This was his usual attitude at concerts, when he was among the audience, and gave an impression of rapt attention, even delicate ecstasy, in what he heard.

He clapped his hands noiselessly together once or twice as Christie finished, looking at him with a smile.

"Yes!" he said, dragging out the word, and then again, "Yes!"

It was enigmatic. It expressed neither praise nor blame.

His son carefully polished his gold-rimmed eyeglasses with a white silk handkerchief, examining each glass with his head on one side after doing so.

Christie looked from one to the other anxiously. All his years of work, all his months of waiting, seemed to drop into the silence, wasted and lost.

He knew that he had failed—utterly failed—knew it as surely as if the hisses of a great audience were sounding in his ears.

A pang shot through his heart, like physical pain, making him weak and pale. The seconds seemed as long as minutes. It became unbearable.

He took a step towards Signor Martelli, the violin and

bow clutched in his left hand, the right outstretched appealingly.

"Tell me the truth," he said.

His voice snapped the tension. Martelli rose from his chair. Luigi Martelli, at the piano, returned the silk handkerchief to his pocket with a flourish. Christie felt like a prisoner who, as he turns to leave the dock after a verdict of guilty, sees the bustle and animation of the crowd in court, eager to escape when the sport is over.

"You must have worked very hard, Mr. Christie," said the elder Martelli, "for you play with a certain ease, or flexibility, that is the outcome of hard work. You have a true ear. I congratulate you on many points, but——"

He shrugged his shoulders and glanced at his son, before completing the sentence.

"But you have much to learn. You must not be discouraged when I tell you that all your labours, so far, have carried you but a short distance on a long road."

"Say! I'm not a soft kind of a boy!" exclaimed Christie, with the twang and in the words of the young, brusque Canadian. "You needn't let me down so easy. Guess I can take a blow without whining. I asked for the truth. Why don't you give it me, straight from the shoulder?"

He stopped abruptly. The unusual passion with which he had spoken died away. He was ashamed, and stammered a word of humble apology.

Martelli hardly noticed the words he spoke, whether they were courteous or rude, for he suddenly realized the power and attraction of the young man's face, especially the fire and beauty of his glance—not so much a flashing glance, as a strong level ray of inner light.

Luigi, instantly perceiving the change in his father's expression, glanced from one to the other with as much interest as if he were watching a clever piece of acting on the stage. He wished that it were possible to add a dramatic

touch to the situation. If only he could have exclaimed, "Father, this youth will be the greatest violinist in the world!"

Alas! He knew that Christie would never be a great violinist, and was never more surprised in his life when Signor Martelli, impulsively grasping the hand that the young man held out to him, spoke to him in the voice and with the manner of a comrade. His fine affectation, that had become second nature, slipped off like a hooded cloak, and he threw his arm round the boy's shoulders with the quick, caressing freedom of his own youth.

"Take heart, dear lad!" he said. "I will give you the opportunity to test your power. It is not in your nature, I am sure, to be satisfied with false praise or foolish flattery. You have so much to learn. You have everything to learn! I cannot promise you success, but if you fail——"

He stopped with an expressive gesture of despair.

"I have the courage to fail," said Christie.

Signor Martelli looked a little doubtfully at his son and was silent for a minute, twisting the point of his small beard between his fingers. Then he turned his eyes again on Christie, studying his eager face.

"Yes, I have made up my mind to help you," he said deliberately, "although Luigi may think that I am wasting my time."

"My dear father!" protested Luigi, a little shocked at such candour before a stranger. "I am sure Mr. Christie will amply repay any small kindness that it is in your power to offer him."

Martelli waved his hand, dismissing this ceremonious little speech.

"I mean to give you lessons, Mr. Christie. Do you know why?" he asked abruptly.

"No! I can only be grateful!" exclaimed the youth.

"For the rare pleasure of indulging a whim," said Martelli, with a return to his usual voice and manner. "As a rule I am prudent, keen in business, and not easily

moved, but now and then I find that this cold country of yours has not altered my southern temperament. As a young man I went to extremes of pleasure when the mood seized me. Now that I am old "—his appearance contradicted the words—" I seek delight in more subtle ways. I am generally able to resist temptation, but not always. I was tempted last year, for instance, to buy a certain violin. It was ruinous, but it's mine! Luigi did not approve."

" Are you tempted in the same way to take Mr. Christie for a pupil ? " asked his son, with a little bow and smile at their guest. " I assure you that in this case I shall highly approve."

" Then it is settled," said Martelli, as if the matter entirely depended on his son's decision. " I can now indulge my whim with a clear conscience. You are my whim, Mr. Christie! I am going to teach you the violin for my own pleasure and gratification."

" Let me warn you, however, that my father's whims are very serious matters to other people," observed Luigi.

" I think I understand your father," said Christie.

" I am sure you do," said the famous violinist.

It was late in the evening when Felix Christie, after a long walk under the stars, returned to the house in Waterloo Road.

He was in no mood for Millidew's boisterous company, and, after a minute's hesitation on the first-floor landing, tapped at the door of Miss Boscombe's sitting-room. She had often invited him to call in.

He felt instinctively that such sympathy as he craved it was only in the power of a woman to bestow, the unquestioning sympathy he had never known in his old life, the strength and confidence that would restore his own.

Miss Boscombe was alone, as he had expected, knowing that her mother retired to rest at an early hour in the evening.

The room he entered was inexpensively and prettily furnished ; there were some fresh flowers, eked out with ivy, in glass vases on the mantelpiece ; all the plain, rush-bottomed chairs were supplied with bright cretonne covers ; short muslin curtains took the place at the windows of the long, draggled lace curtains dear to Mrs. Poole and other landladies ; the gas was shaded by a muslin frill of the same pattern ; there was a bookcase with two shelves, Miss Boscombe's collection of classics tightly packed in at the top, as if they dreaded a transportation to Mrs. Boscombe's row of soiled novels below.

There was a bird-cage, shrouded for the night, hanging in the window, and a sleek tabby cat curled up on the hearthrug.

The cheerful ease of the room was very grateful to Christie, although it gave him none of the admiring pleasure he had experienced in Signor Martelli's house.

Miss Boscombe, who had been typewriting at her cheap little machine in a corner, was a little surprised at his visit, although she had invited him, and wondered what they could talk about. She was not stupid, but doubtful of her ability to entertain a young man all by herself.

Her mother had told her so often that men only care for pretty girls—Mrs. Boscombe had been a pretty girl—that poor Ettie was in danger of the egotism of excessive self-depreciation.

She would not have been at all surprised to know that there was not the remotest chance of Christie falling in love with her, for no one had ever fallen in love with her, but her amazement would have been great had she realized how much he liked her.

Her voice was so soft and well modulated ; he compared it in his mind with his mother's rasping tones and wondered at the difference ; her manner was so friendly and put him at his ease ; she seemed such a sensible girl and he could talk to her in the same way as if she were a man.

No! Not quite in the same way. The more he thought about it, the more he appreciated the difference.

What an extraordinary thing that was! Christie pondered over it, staring into the fire, for it was such a short time ago he had ignored girls—all girls—with the easy self-confidence and indifference to unknown dangers of the young boy.

As he lifted his eyes to Ettie Boscombe's face, feeling that she was looking at him, all his thoughts merged into the desire for her sympathy and advice.

"I've got to make up my mind about the future," he said, plunging into the subject. "I want you to help me, if you will."

"Of course!"

That was all she said—no protestations of willingness, no affected doubts of her ability—two strong words of assurance, and no more.

"I've been to see Signor Martelli. He treated me just fine!" Christie went on. "I've never seen such a man before. I met his son too, Mr. Luigi Martelli. The father played for me. Such music! I never heard music until to-day. I shall remember it as long as I live. It was wonderful—heavenly——"

He suddenly covered his face with his hands, trembling in all his limbs.

Ettie was surprised and touched. What a boy he seemed to the practical experience of her twenty-one years! Her impulse was to kneel down in front of him and take him in her arms, as she would have consoled a child.

After a minute he recovered his self-control, smiling a little at himself.

"Don't think it made me unhappy," he said. "But it was so sweet—it was so lovely—say, it made you feel just like crying with joy. I'm an awful kid to talk to you like this, Miss Boscombe, but you know what I mean, don't you?"

"Yes," she answered.

" Then he wanted me to play again, but I was ashamed," Christie continued. " I made him tell me the truth about my work, and at last he did. Miss Boscombe, everything I do is wrong! My methods are all wrong. My playing is all wrong. I even hold the violin and the bow all wrong!"

An exclamation of pity broke from her lips. She realized the ordeal he had passed through and waited eagerly for the next words.

" At first, I must confess, I felt pretty mean," he went on. " Think of the years I've wasted! I didn't say much, but they were so kind, both the father and son, that I'm sure they understood. I don't know why, but they seemed to like me very much. Martelli has offered to give me lessons for nothing! I can't take it in. I am to go to him once a week. I don't know how I thanked him, Miss Boscombe. I just made a fool of myself. 'You'll have to work,' he said. 'You'll have to work like——' 'Like the devil,' put in Mr. Luigi. 'No! Like an angel!' said Martelli himself."

" How good it is of him. How splendid!" exclaimed Ettie.

" I knew you'd say so," said Christie. " I felt you'd appreciate what it means. I couldn't tell Millidew to-night. I could just as soon have told the Mus Doc and his wife. Now, Miss Boscombe, am I to accept Martelli's offer? Can I?"

" I don't think you ought to hesitate for a minute," said Ettie. " Of course you must accept it."

He laughed, with sudden amusement at her ignorance of the only difficulty.

Then he thrust his hand into an inner pocket of his coat and pulled out his pocket-book and purse. He opened them both carefully on the table, and made a little pile of the silver and a smaller pile of the gold, finally spreading out the three ten-dollar bills that represented the farewell gift of his old friends at Mapleville.

" Now, Miss Boscombe, you're a little business girl—tell me how long I can live on my fortune in London ! " he cried.

His change of mood, from intense earnestness to boyish mirth, surprised her as much as the words he used. To be called " a little business girl " was only a trifle, but it re-adjusted their positions in her mind. It made her feel young. They laughed at each other, with sudden intimacy, one on each side of the table, and the money between them.

" That's all I've got to live on, honour bright ! " said Christie. " If I learn with Martelli I shall not be able to make any money at the same time, unless I could do it at night. I must give the best hours of the day to practising. If I refuse his offer——"

" You are not going to refuse it," she interrupted decisively.

" No, sir ! " agreed the young Canadian. " But I repeat, that if I did refuse it, I guess I could make a very good living in many easier ways than playing the fiddle. I'm an odd sort of a boy, Miss Boscombe," he continued, becoming serious again, " for although I've set my heart on the violin, there are times when I don't care a rap about it ! No stability, I suppose. I wonder——"

He returned his money to the purse and pocket-book thoughtfully.

" I suppose I couldn't get a room much cheaper than in this house," he went on. " It's a good place to practise. Let me see ! I mustn't lend another penny to poor old Ned. Then I must stop Mrs. Poole giving me my breakfast. I can do it at half the cost myself. A young fellow in my financial position mustn't blow himself out with rashers of bacon or boiled eggs at sixteen a shilling."

" How absurd you are ! " laughed Ettie. " Why don't you put that Canadian money in the Post Office Savings Bank ? You might get your pocket picked."

" I'll change the bills to-morrow morning and do so,"

said Christie. " You're a most practical friend, Miss Boscombe. Now there's only one more thing that bothers me, and that's my bowing arm. I don't know what to do about it. In Canada the pain was fitful, but since I came here and practised a bit hard, I'm afraid it's worse. I didn't mention it to-day. Do you think I ought to show it to somebody ? Some doctor, I mean, or go to a hospital ? Would rubbing do it any good—what do they call it—massage ? "

It did not strike Ettie at the time, but in afterthought, how quickly he had slipped into the way of asking her advice, as if she were his sister.

" Yes, I've a very great faith in massage," she replied. " My mother suffers from neuralgia, you know—at least, it isn't neuralgia, but a peculiar dull sensation in all her body—and I rub her for hours. She says it's very soothing. I believe my touch is a little mesmeric. When I was quite a small child I remember standing behind my father, as he lay on the sofa, passing my fingers backwards and forwards over his forehead. It used to send him to sleep. I remember getting very tired, but I didn't care. I was happy to do anything in the world for him."

She turned her face aside for a minute, pretending to arrange the flowers in one of the vases. Then she looked again at her companion.

" If you like," she said hesitatingly, " I will rub your arm every day for a little while, to see if it gives you any relief."

" Oh, Miss Boscombe ! " exclaimed Christie. " It's just lovely of you to offer, but I couldn't give you so much trouble."

" It would be no trouble," she answered quietly. " I am always glad to be of use. I reach home from the office by half-past five; then we have tea, and I've nothing to do between seven and eight. Now, about the morning——"

She puckered her brow for a minute, pulling a little piece of hair over her ear, absently, out of curl.

" I could spare you a quarter of an hour before I go out,"

she said. "It's no good doing this sort of thing at all unless one does it regularly."

"You don't know how grateful I shall be——" began Christie.

"There is no necessity to be so grateful," she interrupted gently. "As I said before, I am always glad to be useful to my friends."

One of her mother's fretful speeches—"You're not at all ornamental, Ettie, so you'd better make yourself useful!"—had passed through her mind, but there was no bitterness in her acceptance of the situation.

When she parted from Felix Christie, Ettie little dreamed that he thought of her, not only as a useful, practical girl, but as a very sweet and dear one into the bargain.

CHAPTER VIII

VITAL DAYS

"OUR top floor back is what I call a classy gent," said poor Mrs. Poole.

This was the highest praise in her vocabulary. Very few lodgers reached a higher standard than was conveyed in the words "a good let."

Millidew was "a fairly good let, if a little fluctuating in regard to the possibles," to quote the Mus Doc, meaning that his payments were apt to be irregular.

Mrs. Boscombe and her daughter were also a good let; the dressmaking widow on the second floor received the same recommendation, but Felix Christie was considered a classy gent.

"He never gives any trouble," said Mrs. Poole. "Pays his rent on the tick, and you wouldn't know he was in the house if it wasn't for the squeaking of his fiddle."

"You can call it squeaking, if you like," said the Mus Doc. "But I think we've got what I call a genus in our top floor back."

Mr. Poole meant a genius, but he always called it "genus."

"Of course, you're the best judge of that, Ernest," said his wife. "But I never came across a better-behaved, saving young man in all my life. He's been with us now for over two months, but he's never made no complaints, besides papering and whitewashing the attic equal to anybody you'd call in to make a good job of it."

"I've half a mind to do the other room to match it," said Mr. Poole.

"I wouldn't, Ernest, if I was you," objected Mrs. Poole.

" Mr. Millidew talks of leaving, and the new person would only want it done over again."

" Ah, there's something in that," acknowledged Mr. Poole.

" Of course, I shall be sorry if Mr. Millidew leaves," his wife meandered on, " though he's a worrying, restless, what you may call insisting young gentleman. But I like the same faces about me. It's a pity there's not more of a family feeling between people and their lets, Ernest."

Mr. Poole, glancing at the collection of little Pooles, seemed to think that he had a sufficiency of family without including the lodgers.

" It's hard to live under the same roof, for months p'raps, and never speak a kind word to one another," she continued. " That's why I put myself out of the way to oblige Miss Boscombe, she always takes notice of the children. I shall never forget the way she bound up Wally's leg when that oldest Johnson boy knocked him down, and made me come into her room and have a cup of tea, I was so upset. Yes, my son, but it's better now " —in a parenthesis to Master Wally, proudly displaying his scarred knee. " Of course, her mamma took no notice. She's quite a different person to Miss Boscombe."

" Mrs. Boscombe is a very lady-like woman," said Mr. Poole.

" I know she is," agreed his wife. " But I don't see why a person can't be polite to another person, even if you do take lodgers and don't keep a girl. A person needn't be looked down on, even if you are superior."

Mrs. Poole's sentence was a little involved, but her meaning was clear.

" Similarly, young Mr. Christie is very friendly and kind," she went on. " There's not many young gentlemen, especially at his age, that would offer to take the scuttle when he meets you on the stairs. ' I'll look after the coals in future, Mrs. Poole,' he said, and he's fetched them up every morning since. Then he bought a coloured hoop,

all covered with bells, for Flo—didn't he, lovey?—and I know that money's very short with him just now."

"How do you know that?" asked the unobservant Mus Doc.

"Look at his face," replied Mrs. Poole. "It's got that tight look across the cheek-bones, and that eager expression in the eye, that only comes to a person when money's short. He's much too young to be cantankerous"—poor Mrs. Poole meant cadaverous—"and you can see for yourself that he's as thin as a dried haddock."

Felix Christie would have been surprised to hear his landlady's account of his condition.

Always inclined to be reticent, he never complained of poverty to his two friends, laughing with Millidew at the straits to which he was reduced, and proving himself an adept at lying on the subject of meals to Ettie Boscombe.

He wrote a long letter to Mr. Pargetter, after his visit to Signor Martelli, giving him a circumstantial account of the whole affair. The reply was typewritten, brief and business-like, with a line scribbled in the boiler manufacturer's own hand at the foot of the page: "In town next month. Please call."

Millidew, having received a cheque from Buckley's on the publication of some of his drawings, promptly paid his debt to his friend. This was somewhat to his friend's surprise and much more to his own, for Edward Millidew was always amazed at the discovery of any original good in his nature, he was so accustomed to original sin.

He chose to regard Felix Christie as a mascot. His first success with the great firm of Buckley's dated from the opening of his friendship with the young Canadian, and he made Christie accompany him, whenever he could drag him away from his violin, on his visits to newspaper offices, leaving his friend to walk up and down outside the buildings while he hawked his wares within.

His attitude towards Mr. Charles Buckley, managing

director of Buckley's, both amused and puzzled Christie, for while Millidew abused the firm on every possible occasion—" pirates," " money-grubbers," " pickers and stealers of other men's brains," " scoundrels selling dirty rags," were among his mildest phrases—he admired and envied the ability and success of the head of the firm with every fibre of his being.

Christie, who was rarely inconsistent in his own moods or conduct, could only suppose that Mr. Buckley possessed a personal charm that was irresistible to Millidew. His own curiosity was aroused, as much as it ever could be, by Millidew's talk of this man of affairs, this " blower of the bellows of the mighty organ of the Press," as a provincial journal had once described Mr. Buckley.

" I wish you'd present me to Mr. Buckley. I'd like to study him," Christie said one day to his friend.

Millidew laughed.

" Do you imagine for a moment, Chris, that he knows me from Adam just because he happens to have bought my drawings ? "

" Yes, I do," said Christie. " If he's such a clever man, Ned, you can bet your last cent he will appreciate the value of a good memory. It would be very impolitic to forget you. He's not what you call a snob, is he ? "

" No, Chris ! " exclaimed Millidew. " He's one of the most courteous men I ever came across, but you can't get at him. That's the devil of it. He's surrounded with troops of people, all ground into little literary bits in the Buckley machine."

" But if you sent in your name direct——" began Christie.

" I know what would happen," interrupted Millidew. " I should be shoved off on one of his editors, or a sub, or a typewriter girl, or an office boy."

" Oh, no ! " laughed Christie.

" Fact, upon my honour ! " said Millidew in his hurried, disjointed way. " You don't know the ways of this cursed

old country. You're too innocent, Chris ! You're verdant. You're like an unplucked peach. You think, because you're as highly strung as your own fiddle, that your fellow-men will handle you gently. Devil a bit, my boy. They'll jar your chords for you and make you wince—but fiddles don't wince, do they ? I'm mixing my metaphors."

" Then never go to see Mr. Buckley again, or any other man in his position," said Christie, returning to the main point. " Go on drawing, but wait till they come to you."

" I might wait till doomsday for that," said Millidew.

" You're wrong, Ned," rejoined his friend. " They want you more than you want them."

" I wonder whether you know what a fool you are," said Millidew, after a pause.

" Of course I do ! " said Christie promptly. " That's the hopeful thing about me. It's the fools who don't know it, the foolish fools, whom you ought to pity."

He gave up the idea of meeting Mr. Charles Buckley, little knowing when and in what manner his interest would again be awakened in the unknown head of the popular firm.

Christie was living through strenuous days. Thanks to the suggestion of a friend of Millidew's, who was an actor, he obtained an engagement to transform himself into a Roman every night, and on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, on the stage of a West End theatre, at a revival of "Julius Cæsar."

" Pure, unadulterated luck ! " was the verdict of Millidew.

Christie had had the good luck to make friends with the aforesaid actor, the good luck to present himself at the theatre on the very day when supers and " extra gentlemen " were being chosen, the good luck to be considered a handsome youth, and the good luck to win the instant approval of the producer of the play.

He was not in the least stage-struck. The glorious glitter of a weekly guinea was the sole attraction, but he

found behind the scenes of the theatre, a welcome change from his long hours of practice and the harassing anxiety, which forced itself more and more upon his mind, of the growing weakness of his right arm.

Miss Boscombe's rubbing had given him, for a while, relief from pain. But there were times when he was obliged to leave off playing altogether, perhaps for the whole day, and he struggled in vain with the intense despondency that accompanied this compulsory idleness.

Such darkening of the spirit had been wholly unknown to Christie in the old Mapleville days, although he recognized the shadow of it had been cast before in the childish fits of gloom which his mother's severity had caused him in early years.

He was absorbed in music at this period of his career, obsessed with the idea of becoming a great violinist, and consciously influenced in thought, word, and deed by the personality of Martelli.

His master was a great reader, a student, and took little interest in current events. Christie used to say in after years that it was Martelli who first led him into the world of books. In that world of unspeakable delight he wandered far away, enchanted, bewildered, and quickened to new thought and a wider outlook.

He had little spare time, but managed every day to spend half an hour in the drawing-room on the first floor, entertaining Ettie Boscombe and her mother with descriptions of his experiences at the theatre and at Signor Martelli's house.

Ettie's pleasant voice and friendly interest had the same soothing effect on his mind as her soft fingers had on his arm. She always refreshed and pleased him, and he was very, very fond of her.

Mrs. Boscombe, who supplemented her daughter's earnings—Ettie was a clever shorthand writer and typist —with a small annuity, was the widow of a doctor. She was one of those peculiarly irresponsible women who

generally marry young, rely upon their husbands for everything, and imagine themselves ill-used by the world in general.

Her appearance was pleasing, if a little sickly, for her face was as smooth as a baby's, her eyes blue and plaintive, with light eyelashes, and her hands that had never done any work were as white as if they were chalked.

Christie was puzzled, until he grew accustomed to her, by the mysterious nature of the illness from which Mrs. Boscombe suffered. It was not insomnia, for she frequently mentioned how well she slept, as if it were a virtue ; it was not indigestion, for her appetite, although fastidious, was remarkably good for such an invalid ; it was not a painful complaint, for she always looked serene, except when she was out of temper ; it had had the effect of weakening her limbs until she could hardly walk, and it possessed a peculiar fascination for very sympathetic or rather stupid people.

Poor, stupid Mrs. Poole gloated over Mrs. Boscombe's pallor and inertia, and poor, sympathetic Ettie had long been a willing slave.

Mrs. Boscombe was always reading novels, and it was not difficult to keep her supplied, as she made a boast of forgetting everything she read. She was fond of expatiating on the vulgarity and uselessness of works of fiction, treating the authors in her mind as contemptuously as she treated the books in her hands. Mrs. Boscombe invariably turned down corners, jagged uncut pages apart with her fingers, and not infrequently spilt her coffee or tea over the bindings.

Ettie had inherited her mother's soft voice, but resembled in every other way the father to whom she had been devoted. Christie, when she described the great affection that had existed between them, was moved to speculate, for the first time in his life, on the probable character of his own dead father. His name and the fact that he had lived, married, and died in New England was all that he knew.

He attributed his mother's secrecy to the peculiarity of her temper, often recalling, with a surprise it had not awakened at the time, her rare fits of passionate tenderness, seeming to hint that she was a woman of strong, but sternly repressed, emotion.

He had never thought of her critically, even in his sunless childhood, but during those first English years he realized that a shadow had always hung over his home. It had been unsuspected by their friends, to whom his mother showed herself as a not unusual type of hard-working, good, difficult-tempered woman, but dimly perceived by the boy.

At the end of the run of the revival of " Julius Cæsar," failing to renew his engagement at the theatre, Christie was again faced with a terrible lack of what the Mus Doc called " the possibles." He had not touched his capital of ten pounds in the Post Office Savings Bank, placed there at the entreaty of Ettie Boscombe, but was obliged to withdraw a part of that amount to buy some necessary clothes and new boots.

Millidew suggested that he should apply to Pargetter for a loan, but the idea was repugnant to the Canadian for the very reason that appealed to his friend.

Christie had called on Mr. Pargetter at his London office. He was received with effusive kindness, asked innumerable questions, and presented, in spite of his protests, with a five-pound note.

" That's all right ! " said Mr. Pargetter. " I've talked to Signor Martelli about you. He thinks you're going to do big things. He didn't say so, but I know what he meant. It's all very well to be proud and independent, my boy " —as Christie again tried to return the gift—" but it's false pride to reject a little kindness from a man who is old enough to be your father, and who has known what it is to be stony-broke."

Then followed a hasty anecdote of the boiler manufacturer's youth—his hand on the bell to summon his clerk

the whole time—and Christie left the office with the note in his pocket, but a fixed resolve never to take advantage of his friend's generosity and noble, unsuspicious nature.

So the strenuous days passed on. They were anxious, but not inglorious days, for the wreath of his youth was still budding on his brow, and he heard the music of the world in the song of his violin.

CHAPTER IX

THE BROKEN STRINGS

ETTIE BOSCOMBE was writing a story. That is to say, she was trying to write a story, with a visionary hope of winning a three-guinea prize in one of the weekly papers issued by the great firm of Buckley's.

The paper was open in front of her on the table, to act as an inspiration. She paused now and again, in an elaborate description of a ball in Mayfair—they favoured Mayfair, the paper circulating in the suburbs—to refresh her memory with the editorial recommendation to make the tale "original, witty, up-to-date, strong in incident, full of character, suitable for the home circle, and not exceeding three hundred words."

Ettie had had a few stories published, but, in her own words, she had never had the good luck to get into Buckley's. Her frequent correspondence with Buckley's editors had always taken the form, on her part, of a polite request to "kindly consider the enclosed MS.," and printed regrets, on their part, with the return of the enclosed MS.

Mrs. Boscombe, lying on the sofa, with her attention divided between a novel and a little paper bag of sweets, frequently interrupted with irrelevant remarks, so that the literary effort progressed in this fashion:—

"Irene lifted her bright dark eyes to his stern dark face." Ettie paused a minute over her adjectives, wondering whether the hero's face ought to match the heroine's eyes.

"How do you think they make jujubes?" said Mrs. Boscombe.

"I don't know, dear," said Ettie, and proceeded: "It melted a little [the hero's face] under the warm glow of her—of her——" the words "cheeks" and "nose" occurred to the authoress, to be instantly rejected.

"Do you think I'd better have the coffee lace, after all, on my new dressing-jacket?" asked her mother.

"It would look very nice, dear," replied Ettie, and went on with the conversation in her story.

"'I have to earn my bread!' exclaimed Irene, with a sudden catch in her throat [Ettie wondered what that useful phrase, "A catch in the throat," really meant], and her eyes swam [all Ettie's heroines overworked their eyes], while the man with fond tenderness whispered——"

"I wish you'd get me my salts and put a rug on my feet," said Mrs. Boscombe.

Ettie obeyed and then returned to her manuscript, but she had quite forgotten what the man was about to whisper, so she scored out his fond tenderness and wrote this striking sentence: "'One must live!' exclaimed Irene. 'Pardon me,' said Roger, with his indescribable air of detachment, 'but is that absolutely necessary?'"

She put down her pen and meditated over Roger's grim question. He was a true hero, possessed of every virtue demanded by the Buckley editor. "But how I should hate him!" thought Ettie.

She suddenly burst out laughing and drew a thick line through Roger's last remark.

"Why are you scratching it all out?" asked Mrs. Boscombe.

"Because it's such rubbish, dear," replied the girl, and she went to the window, looking out into the eternally busy, eternally noisy Waterloo Road.

"It can't be greater rubbish than this!" said her mother, tossing aside the book that had amused and interested her the whole afternoon.

It was an autumn evening, clear and warm. The sky was still rosy over the roofs with sunset clouds. All the

houses in the street looked grey and dusty in the afterglow.

Ettie, playing with the cord of the Venetian blind, watched the people below in idle curiosity, wondering why she found it so difficult to write an ordinary tale when every passer-by could have told a secret story, the story of his own life, of deep human interest.

A smart tap on the door made her drop the blind-cord and run to open it. She knew the tap. It was Felix Christie.

" Oh, come in ! Where have you been all day ? I want to show you—— Felix ! What's the matter ? "

As he stepped into the room the light fell upon his face. She saw that he was absolutely colourless, while his eyes stared hopelessly, blankly into hers, as if he were a dumb man.

Mrs. Boscombe, eating the last of her sweets, did not look at him. Ettie put her hand on his shoulder.

" Oh, Felix ! What is the matter ? " she repeated.

He slipped up one hand to grasp her fingers, still staring at her with the same expression.

" It's all right ! " he said, trying to reassure her and wipe out the trouble in her face that mirrored his own. " I want to talk to you. I've something to tell you. Will you come out ? I can't speak here. It's stifling—will you come ? "

She glanced at her mother and then at the clock.

" Yes, if you really want me——" she began.

" I'll wait for you below," he interrupted, and was gone.

Ettie expected to find him, when she went downstairs in her hat and jacket a few minutes later, talking to Mr. Poole in the shop, but he was not there.

" Mr. Christie's out in the street, miss," said the Mus Doc, " he's prancin' up and down like a roaring lion ! "

Allowing for Mr. Poole's exaggeration, for poor Christie was neither prancing nor roaring, Ettie was so agitated by his manner and voice that she clenched her hands in the

side-pockets of her jacket to hide their trembling. She had had no idea that anything to do with him, the friend of a few short weeks, could have moved her so deeply.

"Pray—pray tell me! What is it?" she said, joining him in the street.

"Let's walk down to the bridge," he answered; then, looking at her with sudden compunction, "Don't be frightened, Ettie. What a brute I am to frighten you! It's all right! It's only——"

He could not finish the sentence, but turned his face towards the road, away from her, biting his lips.

She noticed, not for the first time, the sharp cut of his jaw and the too deep hollow of his eye-socket. It hurt her more than the misery of his expression, for the sign of physical suffering in a man is more painful to the woman who is beginning to love him than anything else. It is later on, when she knows him well, and only then if they are in harmony with each other, that she understands the inner pains and inner joys that leave the marks upon his face that few can read.

Christie stopped at the first unoccupied stone seat, when they reached Waterloo Bridge, and asked her to sit down.

"You won't mind the wind?" he said. "You won't be cold?"

"No, no."

The rosy clouds were all gone. The shadows of night stretched over the land, turning the crowded buildings into mysterious shapes, while the distant lights on the Embankment flickered like stars on a rainy night.

"Ettie! My whole life is changed!" burst from Christie's lips. "It's all over. I shall never be a great player. A great player! I shall never play at all. It's gone, gone, gone!"

The despair in his face, as he turned away from her towards the slowly flowing river, seemed a shadow of the gathering darkness, as if it had suddenly swept over his soul, leaving him alone in the world.

Ettie Boscombe impulsively seized upon one of his hands, clasping it close and warm between her own. Before she could speak, after her first exclamation, he went on.

"You can guess what's the matter, Ettie. It's been hanging over me for months, and you've thought of it too, I know, for it's my arm. Useless! Useless!"

He clenched his left hand and violently struck his right arm several times, while his face, hitherto so colourless, flushed hot and red with passion.

"Felix! Felix!" implored the girl.

"Forgive me! You're right—I'm acting like a fool," he said, after a few minutes' struggle with himself. "But it's so hard, after all these years——"

He broke off again, staring down into the river, while the same black shadow of night, banished for a minute by her sympathy, took possession of his heart and mind.

"I don't understand what has happened, Felix," said Ettie. "You must tell me. You don't know how sorry I am!"

He looked at her earnestly. Her voice, without being raised, thrilled him with its unconscious intensity. There was a tone in it he had never heard before, and it seemed to quiver in the air after she was silent. It was like a note of strange, passionate music.

"For weeks I haven't been able to work properly at quick bowing," he said; "but I didn't say a word to Martelli until he found it out. I knew he would find it out sooner or later. I don't know how I've played sometimes at my lessons, for I've been faint—it's the truth, Ettie—positively faint and sick with the pain and effort. Last week I went to a doctor and asked his opinion. I thought he was a fool, but he was right. I believe now he was absolutely right."

"What did he say?"

"I'll tell you. He said I was overworked. I had been overworked for years. I went straight off to Martelli, and he advised me to consult somebody else, and gave me a

letter to the most skilful man in London, who has made a speciality of muscles. I saw him to-day. He was very kind. I shall always remember his kindness and sympathy, but he told me the same tale. The first doctor seemed a bit surprised to hear I was a fiddler, but the second guessed it the minute he touched my arm, although Signor Martelli had not told him."

"Did he give you any advice?" said Ettie.

"Told me to rest for a year. A year! Think of that, Ettie."

"But surely it is worth while——" she began.

"No!" he interrupted decisively. "It would only be an experiment at the best, and this great surgeon has no faith in the experiment. Directly I began to practise he says my muscles would fail me again. He told me the truth, and I agree with him. If I did not agree with him——"

Christie paused for a second to choose his words, speaking very deliberately.

"If I did not agree with him, no respect for medical authority—no reliance on another man's fame and reputation—would make me relinquish my career. But in my secret heart——"

Again he stopped, and then repeated forcefully and quietly:

"In my secret heart, Ettie, I know that the old ambition has already passed away. I mistook myself. *I am not a musician.* It was a dream. The dream is over."

"Then why are you so unhappy, so hurt?" said the girl.

"My dear Ettie," he answered, "I have been trying to show you an inmost thought that is a mystery to myself. I have been devoted to music with all the strength of my nature since I was a mere child. I don't understand, I can't understand, what has happened to me, but I feel that I am free! On the very day that shatters all my hopes I am conscious of an overwhelming sense of freedom."

"Then it is unreasonable to be grieved at all," said Ettie.

"Is it?" he asked, with a slight smile. "I don't think so, Ettie. One doesn't part with an old, cherished idea so easily. No, I haven't exaggerated my disappointment. It is real enough, God knows!"

They were silent for a long time, Christie watching the black waters of the river, and the girl studying his face.

All his words had been the words of youth—the violence, the quickly changing moods, the misery, the self-absorption of youth—but a subtle change had taken place in Christie during the past few weeks, that marked him as a boy no longer. Ettie realized it, before this hour of emotion was over, but would have been utterly unable to define the difference that she plainly saw in him.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the dark frown passed from his face and he knelt up on the stone seat, to watch a small steamer passing under the bridge.

"What is it, Felix?" asked the girl.

"Nothing!" he answered. "Only the people were all looking up at us, and I wanted to see their faces."

He sat down again and described what he had seen, in the poor light, of the men and women on board—slight sketches, but firm and accurate, little word-pictures, pointed with humour, sharpened with pathos.

"Why, Felix, I've never heard you talk so well!" exclaimed Ettie Boscombe.

He laughed a little and became self-conscious.

"I'm always describing things to myself," he confessed. "It's a silly old habit of mine. It comes as natural to me as playing the fiddle—ah! but that's all over."

The shadow returned to his face. He lost interest in the boats on the river.

"What are you going to do?" asked Ettie.

"I don't know!" he replied. "I must get to work somehow to earn my bread and molasses."

"Will you write to your mother?"

"No, I think not. What's the use of worrying her? Besides, she hasn't any money to spare."

"Will you give up practising the violin altogether?"

"I guess so, for a while."

"I don't believe you could live any cheaper, if you tried."

"I shall have to try, anyway."

Ettie shook her head in a very doubtful manner.

"Don't look so scared!" said Christie, touching her hand. "I shall get along all right. How cold you are! Poor little girl! Let us walk a bit. Will you come? I can't go into the house yet. I should want to kill Millidew if he started arguing with me just now."

They turned their backs on Waterloo Bridge and made their way, along the Strand, to Piccadilly.

"I wish the Park gates were not closed," said Ettie. "It is so much more restful and soothing to walk on the grass under the trees."

"Not for me in my present mood," said Christie. "I want to see and feel that I am surrounded by people who are all alike, struggling, suffering, fighting, rejoicing."

"Do you ever feel jealous of the wealth and happiness of others?" said Ettie, as they stood still for a minute to allow a couple of men and a lady to pass in front of them into one of the restaurants.

The lady was in a long, canary-coloured cloak of silk and lace, closely held round her slender figure, giving more than a glimpse of dainty shoes and stockings. The men were both young, good-looking, and obviously well pleased with themselves and the world.

One of them was looking at the lady so earnestly—she had thrown a careless word to him over her shoulder—that he knocked against Christie in passing.

He looked up, with a word of apology, and Christie saw that he was little more than a boy; a frank, handsome, clear-skinned boy, his open lips showing a gleam of fine

teeth and his eyes sparkling with health and good temper.

The lady, with a second glance over her shoulder, threw him another careless word.

"Come along, Houghton!" she said.

Ettie Boscombe only looked at the canary-coloured cloak. Christie only looked at the boy.

"I like Houghton!" he said as they walked on.

"Houghton?" repeated Ettie.

"The young fellow who came last, talking to the girl."

"I didn't notice him," and no more was said.

Christie would have been surprised to hear the boy named Houghton say to his two companions, as he took his seat at the dinner-table:

"Did you happen to notice a man I tumbled over as we came in?"

"I'm sorry to say I missed seeing you tumble over," answered the lady.

"Wonderful-looking fellow!" continued the boy. "Our faces were quite close together, and his eyes seemed to be shooting out fire. S'trordinary eyes! Not a quick flash, you know, but quiet and steady. The kind of eyes to burn you up slowly without any blaze."

His companions laughed at him and he changed the subject; but it stopped in his mind for several minutes, and that was a long time for anything, at this period of his life, to stop in Houghton's mind.

Christie and Ettie Boscombe walked on and on, indifferent to the hour, unconscious of fatigue.

They talked little, but the sensitive girl knew that her companion was gradually becoming tranquil.

The stars came out, and brooding night hung, like a veil, over the garish streets, the mean alleys, the dim and flaring lamps, the tramping feet, the laughter and the tears of this great, unsleeping city.

Ettie Boscombe parted with Christie at the door of her sitting-room. A light gleamed across the landing where

they stood to say good night, but their faces were in shadow.

He could not see that her eyes were full of tears. She was utterly weary and overwrought. Her hand hardly returned the long pressure of his. She leaned against the banisters as he climbed the stairs, looking after him, and did not turn into her room until she heard his door open and close.

CHAPTER X

PASSING YEARS

TWO years had come and gone.

It was two years since Felix Christie's young ambition fell away from him. It was two years since he tramped the West End streets, with Ettie Boscombe, on the eventful night of the broken strings.

It was two years since he stood alone in the world, his career ruined, with only a few pounds between him and starvation.

Two years had made little outward difference in the Mus Doc's house in Waterloo Road, although there were several changes within its walls.

A new baby had dethroned the old baby, adding one more little crying Poole to the family.

The tall, thin widow was still dressmaking on the second floor. Mrs. Boscombe and her daughter still occupied the best set of rooms in the house, but, in poor Mrs. Poole's own words, "the attics had had their ups and downs to an extreeordinary degree."

There had been sorrow at Mr. Millidew's departure, greatly intensified when Mr. Christie followed his example.

It was suspected by both the Mus Doc and his wife that Mr. Christie moved because he was obliged to retrench, but he would not allow them to reduce the rent.

After drifting round about the neighbourhood for a while, his small amount of portable property gradually growing less and less, he thought it wiser not to inform his few friends of his too frequent changes of address, and disappeared altogether for several months.

Even Ettie Boscombe, his greatest friend, and Millidew, who understood the wretchedness of poverty in London as well as most men, were never quite sure of what happened to Christie.

He kept his own counsel, but there were times when he betrayed—half in jest, half in earnest—an intimate knowledge of the life of the streets from a man's standpoint who has starved and suffered, slept without a roof to cover his head, and known the temptations to villainy of cold and hunger and despair.

When Christie emerged from the depths, stirred with reviving hope and hardened to endure, he resolutely turned his back upon the secret experiences of these terrible months. He had never lost control of himself, or acknowledged that he was beaten in the struggle with fate.

He used to declare, in the whimsical manner that was so characteristic of his later years, that this was the exact period when he took the first steps on the road to literary fame.

The manner of that step is best described in his own words, spoken at a public dinner many years afterwards, in reply to the toast of his health.

" When I was one or two and twenty," he said on that occasion, " I found myself in the unfortunate position of being unable to earn my bread, although I was strong and willing to accept any kind of work.

" I lived in Lambeth at that time, in a house and a street that I am happy to say has recently disappeared, as I do believe it was one of the most deplorable and grotesque places in all this deplorable and grotesque city.

" I was a great walker in those days, necessarily, and in my vague wanderings in search of a job—and a job, by the way, outshines the end of the rainbow in its habit of retreating on pursuit—I came across the office of a certain suburban newspaper in a back street in Hammersmith.

" It was a very small office. Our chairman could have

dropped it, figuratively speaking, into his waistcoat pocket [the chairman, at the dinner where Felix Christie gave this little bit of autobiography, was Sir Charles Buckley, M.P.], but in the window was a card that swept me off my feet with excitement and hope, and literally into the building without a second's loss of time. It appeared that the card had only just been put into the window, and I was the first applicant.

" I have read many beautiful passages on the subject of Work in our literature, many noble sentiments, but the five words on that grimy little card will always cling in my memory—' Man wanted to deliver bills.' That was all.

" The distribution of bills, to advertise a new local paper, was the idea of the editor himself. Poor fellow ! He was my first friend in the great, brotherly world of journalism. I was engaged on the spot. I cannot imagine why he employed me, for I had no references as to respectability —not much respectability, as a matter of fact, to mention in references—and my personal appearance must have suggested to the unthinking public that the proprietor was in a very bad way to engage such a shabby individual even to deliver his bills.

" I solemnly promised the editor not to dispose of the circulars by throwing them surreptitiously in half-dozens into quiet areas—a sore temptation, gentlemen, that I hope you will never be in a position to struggle with—and I can honestly declare that I kept my word.

" I have made many failures and many errors, I know, during my humble pursuit of our great calling, but I can forgive myself much when I think of those bills.

" My work of distribution only continued for a week, it is true, but during those seven days I never wavered for a minute from obeying the commands laid upon me by my chief—one bill, one letter-box, one knock !

" This was my very first dealing in any way with the Press, so I think I may claim that I started my career literally on the very threshold, and know what it means,

from personal experience, to try to push one's work through a closed door."

The above story was an absolute fact, first related to Millidew and Ettie Boscombe a month after it happened, when Christie felt that he was justified in renewing his old friendships.

He was then making himself generally useful inside, instead of outside, the office of the ill-fated weekly called " Hammersmith Society."

To begin with, it was difficult to find any Society of the required sort in the neighbourhood, although several well-known people were then living in that part of London, and the paper was doomed to failure from its first issue, in spite of the strenuous efforts of its eccentric editor and his limited staff.

Christie, after his promotion, at first combined the duties of office boy, clerk, typist, and mediator between his employer, who was a man of violent temper, and the local printers. He soon evolved into assistant advertisement agent—his principal being a broken-down, unreliable man who had seen better days—occasional reporter, and editorial adviser.

His brief career as a bill distributor was never mentioned in the office, for it wounded the chief's dignity to think of his colleague having entered the service of " Hammersmith Society " in such a very humble capacity.

Christie threw himself, with the enthusiasm of those first, never-to-be-forgotten weeks in London, into this new work. He gave all his spare time to reading the books recommended by his editor and beginning to learn French and German, but unfortunately the spare time was very limited, and he often fell asleep from utter weariness in the middle of the most exciting novel or interesting part of his studies.

He often longed for his violin, but it had reposed in the old leather case for many a day in his favourite pawnshop in Waterloo Road.

Christie lived, during his connexion with "Hammersmith Society," in a street of old-fashioned little houses near the river. It was at this time that he contracted the habit of taking long, solitary walks to all parts of London.

Unlike the majority of young men, it was the morning, not the night, that attracted him in city life. He had always needed very little sleep, and often rose at three or four in the morning, left home while the stars were still bright in the sky, and tramped the quiet streets before half the world was awake.

He had many strange friends, both men and women; not the kind of friends he could introduce, or even mention, at the houses of Mr. Pargetter or Mr. Buckley—whom he was to visit on intimate terms a while later—but good friends, nevertheless, who remembered him long after he had passed out of their ken.

Christie, even in the days of his youth, was not a severe judge of his fellow-beings. No man was ever the worse, or woman the more unhappy, for knowing him, while many were helped, many were softened, by the innate strength and compassion of his nature.

He saw much of Ettie Boscombe and Edward Millidew, but did not attempt, during those early struggles, to renew his friendship with Henry Pargetter or Signor Martelli.

Christie and the editor did everything in their power to prevent the wreck of the feeble little "Hammersmith Society."

They interviewed local celebrities; wrote up local affairs; agitated local reforms; penned fiery epistles to each other under assumed names on local abuses; welcomed and criticised local literary efforts—in short, to quote the editor's own words, "did every damned pleasant thing that came into their heads."

It was all of no avail, but Christie was consoled by an unexpected success in a very different quarter. He had written, with great care, half a dozen short character sketches of people with whom he had met and held con-

versations during his morning walks, and sent them to one of the Buckley papers. They were not only accepted at once, but he was asked to submit other contributions.

These six sketches and others that followed formed the nucleus of his first, but little-known, book, entitled "London Dawns."

It was Ettie who had persuaded him to try to write a story.

Poor Ettie herself had at last found a market for her own romantic tales, the market being a trade journal published by a firm of paper-pattern cutters, where a short story and a long serial were interpolated between the drawings of impossible-shaped ladies, dressed in the latest fashions, the only stipulation being for a strong love interest and a happy ending.

It was not inspiring work for the authors, especially as the editor believed in variety on every page, and dropped alien paragraphs in little fancy borders into the text, so that the reader was suddenly informed, in the middle of the most thrilling part of the tale, how to make apple jelly, stuff a home-made sofa cushion, or give a rose-leaf tint to a sallow complexion.

Even Christie, who would have done anything in the world for his friend, teased Ettie unmercifully about her market, and made the happy suggestion that, as she was paid by the number of words, it would be useful to make her heroes and heroines freely quote poetry—thus :—

"When George was sitting alone, by the darkening hearth, the following beautiful lines of the late Poet Laureate sang in his ears"—then Ettie might copy out one of Tennyson's lengthy poems.

Or again :—

"As the Countess dashed down the grassy slope, in that awful minute before she plunged to destruction, the following scene, beloved in her innocent childhood, flashed into her maddened brain"—long quotation from one of Shakespeare's plays.

Ettie took it all in good part, pretending to be very proud when her editor, grandly ignoring the fact that she lived in Waterloo Road, requested Miss Boscombe to lay her scenes always in Belgravia, as he could see she was intimately acquainted with life in that quarter of town.

Christie's first story was written and rewritten several times, for he was still like a skilful workman who appreciates the uses, but has not learned to handle, new tools; or a born artist who has never touched a brush.

It was a simple story, called " A Pearl of Great Price," conceived, inspired, and written for the honour and glory of the pearl of his youth—his adored mistress, his *Belle Dame sans Merci*—in plain words, the girl with whom he had fallen in love, Miss Margaret Henning.

CHAPTER XI

PEARL

IT was Ettie Boscombe—dear girl, interwoven with all the vital minutes of his life!—who had introduced Felix to Miss Henning.

Ettie called her Pearl. He instantly thought the name appropriate, and a verse of poetry came into his head, after the manner that he had suggested for the hero of Ettie's story:—

> "All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag of one bee:
> All the wonder and wealth of the mine in the heart of one gem:
> In the core of one pearl all the shade and the shine of the sea——"

His thoughts were changed and the verse shattered by the sound of her voice. She had only been silent for a minute to acknowledge the introduction, and took up the thread of her conversation where she had broken it off.

"'Look here, Miss Gambol, if it comes to that I'd better go. It'll be better for everybody,' I said. 'I don't think you've got any call to say that, Pearl,' she said. 'We've all done our best to be agreeable.' 'I don't deny that,' I said. 'And I suppose it isn't your fault if you haven't succeeded.' She coloured up like fire! 'Least said, soonest mended,' she said—no, I said that"—and so on and so on.

Miss Pearl Henning was undoubtedly a pretty girl, exceptionally pretty, with a long plait of tow-coloured hair hanging down her back.

Her face was round in shape, delicately tinted in colouring; her eyes were light blue, a little spoilt by the wide stretch of the lids, giving her a wondering, startled expression, very captivating until one grew accustomed to it.

Her lips were full and did not quite close, good colour making some compensation for bad form. She had a particularly white throat, encircled with several faint lines, or creases, in the fair skin. Her figure was upright and graceful, but would have suggested to an artist of the beautiful the probability of a great change in middle age, as if the precious pearl would increase in weight, the blooming rose turn into a full-blown peony.

"Did you really quarrel with Miss Gambol?" asked Ettie, after listening to Miss Henning for several minutes.

"Well, there was words!" admitted the girl with tow-coloured hair. "But we didn't quarrel what you'd call badly, Ettie. I don't believe in quarrelling with anybody. It's unkind and silly. Besides, you may want to get something out of them one day, and you can't if there's been a serious row."

Felix Christie hardly noticed what she said. Merely to look at her, wondering at her beauty, was enough for the captivated young man.

It was not the first time he had fallen in love, but all other experiences were as nothing compared with the overwhelming emotion that this girl instantly aroused in his heart and brain.

He did not realize, in the first hour of their meeting, the instant effect she had had upon him. He only knew that she filled him with delight and admiration, but disturbed his self-possession and made him forget everything else in life.

He could not turn his eyes from her face. He was abstracted and inattentive with Mrs. Boscombe and Ettie. He was jealous of all the unknown people she talked about. He seized every opportunity to disparage himself and his work, but longed to hold forth on the greatness of his aims and ambition. In brief, the famous Felix Christie behaved as foolishly, under the influence of this sudden infatuation, as any other young man would have done in similar circumstances.

He learned that Pearl lived in the country, but was visiting a certain Miss Gambol in Bayswater.

Nearly all her conversation turned on the Gambol household. It appeared to be a large family. She displayed malicious ingenuity in comparing every member to some animal.

Miss Gambol was " rather an old cat " ; Mr. Gambol was " an old duck " and " a silly old goat " alternately ; Tom was " a lumbering elephant " ; the twins were " little pigs " ; and even the general servant changed from " a boiled owl " to " a goose, but no chicken."

Christie wondered as to the relationship of these people, but Ettie was evidently accustomed to follow Miss Henning in her confused style of narrative. He thought her consciously humorous, when, as a matter of fact, she was endeavouring to express herself very seriously.

Those wide-open eyes of hers quickly perceived the impression they had made on the young man. She smiled on him in consequence, and became much more affectionate to Ettie.

Pearl Henning was a born coquette. If her methods were somewhat ingenuous and too artfully artless, it must be remembered that her experiences were limited, and she had always found them successful with the young men in her father's shop.

Henning's Store, at the country town where she lived, was quite an important establishment. Her present visit to London was the result of parental discovery of a trifling affair of the heart between Miss Pearl and the head of the grocery department. The former was dismissed at a moment's notice, and the latter packed off to Miss Gambol to " get over it."

She had apparently got over it very satisfactorily, judging by her good spirits and appetite, but still pretended to cherish the memory of her departed grocer with unchanging affection. It was this constancy, as she told Ettie,

that was at the bottom of her frequent disagreements with her hostess, Miss Gambol.

Miss Gambol was a single lady who kept house for her widowed brother; a kind-hearted, thoroughly good woman of no imagination, who believed, in the simplicity of her heart, that Miss Pearl was still desperately in love with an undesirable suitor.

The responsibility of looking after the girl weighed heavily on Miss Gambol, who was an old friend of her father and mother, and whenever Pearl was out of the house the conscientious lady was haunted by the dread of receiving a telegram to say that her guest had eloped.

On the particular afternoon when she had allowed her to go to see Ettie Boscombe, under a solemn promise that she would start for home directly after tea, Miss Gambol was in a fever of anxiety when she had not returned by seven o'clock.

"I dread the sight of a telegraph boy!" she said to her brother, standing on the look out at the door of the shop.

"A. Gambol, Hairdresser" appeared in fancy printing over the window.

Mr. Gambol, who was always calm and inclined to be comatose after a meal—their six o'clock tea had been delayed by the hope of Pearl's return and was only just over—smiled at her unnecessary agitation.

"She will come back," he said, reassuringly. "Miss Margrit knows when she's well off."

"But if you heard her talk about the desperate ways of that young Thompson, Albert——" began his sister, alluding to the banished suitor.

"Chatter! Chatter! Chatter!" interrupted Mr. Gambol. "The girl's been in London a month and she hasn't even had a letter from him. If you'd ever had a lover yourself, Alice, you'd know that when a man means to follow up a thing of that sort, he don't wait a month before doing it. You're not *au fait*, as the French say, with these subjects, my dear."

It was such a frequent habit of Mr. Albert Gambol's to remind his sister of her spinsterhood that the implied sneer no longer pained her. She had kept his house and taken care of his motherless children for eleven years.

She was a short, broad little woman with crisp black hair—like horsehair—eyes like a bird, round and bright, and cherry cheeks. She wore an old-fashioned gold watch-chain round her neck, a large cameo brooch at her collar of real lace, and several rings on her well-scrubbed but work-grimed hands.

A. Gambol's Hairdressing Saloon was a prosperous, well-managed concern. The whole shop looked as if it had just been thoroughly cleaned from floor to ceiling.

Everything that was susceptible of polish was highly polished; the mirrors and glass cases full of combs, brushes, powders, and perfumes fairly shone; the waxen heads of lovely ladies in the windows looked as if such perfect complexions had that very morning glowed for the first time in their cheeks; the bowls of fancy soaps on the counter suggested bubbles of frothy water; even the long plaits of false hair seemed to be glossy from recent application of the brush, and the partially open doors at the back of the shop, inscribed respectively "Shaving and Gents' Hair Cutting" and "Ladies' Hairdressing," gave a glimpse of red velvet easy chairs, big white bowls, and stacks of snowy towels under the care of white-jacketed attendants.

Mr. Gambol himself superintended every detail of the business, dressed the window, and was responsible for the wording of fancy cards, framed in gold, which adorned the walls, designed to attract every class of customer.

They all started, like royal proclamations, with the important name, A. Gambol, in a line by itself, and then proceeded to enlighten and entertain.

On first entering one read the simple statement: "A. Gambol. Hair Specialist. Twenty years' experience. Extensive Connection. Satisfaction Guaranteed." His eye would then fall on the second card: "A. Gambol. Court

Barber. Antiseptic Shaving. Prompt Attention. No Waiting. Cleanliness and Courtesy."

Having read these assurances the visitor would then pass on to "A. Gambol. Tonsorial Artist. Ladies' Own Combings Made Up. Hairdressing and Arranging in Latest Modes"; and having reached the counter by this time he would be faced by "A. Gambol. Perruquier. Wigs of Every Description. Bleaching and Dyeing in All its Branches."

These important announcements were supplemented by smaller cards inscribed "Manicuring," "Chiropody," "Electrolysis," "Transformations," "Face Massage," and so on.

Mr. Gambol suited the shop, being calculated to inspire confidence in nervous or shy customers. He was a large man of middle age; a bland man, with smooth hair, a smooth voice, well-kept, big hands that he had a trick of waving, like flappers, to mildly emphasize his remarks, and a business manner that combined, contradictory as it may sound, patronage with servility. Mr. Gambol's overweening conceit was only equalled by his reverence for superiors, not necessarily intellectual or moral superiors—he did not believe in their existence—but people who had more money in their pockets, better clothes on their backs, or servants to wait upon them.

The house, under his sister's management, was as neat and clean as the shop. Miss Gambol and a general servant devoted their lives to its care; the other members of the hairdresser's family being his son of fourteen and twin daughters a couple of years younger.

Such was the household of which Miss Pearl Henning was giving Felix Christie a glowing account as they walked across Kensington Gardens to Bayswater. Christie's offer to escort the young lady, diffidently and nervously made, had been most graciously accepted.

Pearl quite forgot the disparaging remarks she had made on her friends earlier in the afternoon when she was talking

to Ettie Boscombe, and gave him to understand that she was fondly attached to the whole of the hairdresser's family.

Christie said little ; firstly, because his companion preferred her own conversation to anybody else's ; and secondly, because he was too happy to express himself in commonplace words.

When Miss Gambol, from her post at the shop-door, saw them approaching she experienced the sensation described by ladies of her type as " quite a turn." A second glance at Pearl's companion allayed her fears. He bore no resemblance to the mental picture she had formed of the desperate young Thompson.

She threw open the glass door and welcomed the truant with open arms.

Pearl returned her kisses with unusual effusion—" How sweet, how tender she is to the odd little button-eyed woman ! " thought the young man—and introduced her escort. The master of the house then advanced, rubbing his hands, to be presented.

" My sister thought you had deserted us for good, Miss Margrit," said Mr. Gambol.

" I think it would be for bad, not for good ! " laughed the girl, and she again kissed her hostess's cherry cheek.

" Won't you step upstairs and rest yourself after your walk, Mr. Christophers ? " asked Miss Gambol.

Christie would gladly have stepped on to the roof or into the cellar to prolong his time with Pearl, so he thankfully accepted the invitation.

The drawing-room on the first floor was a heavily furnished, profusely ornamented apartment. The walls were hung with shiny landscapes, enlarged photographs of the family, and bird's-eye views of Hastings, Brighton, and the Isle of Wight, mementoes of summer holidays. On the mantelpiece was a perfect Noah's Ark of china animals, many of them represented as employed in impossible occupations, such as dogs playing at cricket, cats drawing

water out of a well, or pigs swinging on a gate, which afforded continual amusement for Miss Gambol.

The corners of the piano were draped with squares of different-coloured silk, edged with lace. The floor was thickly carpeted and dotted with little sheepskin mats, dyed green or magenta. Long white curtains hung at the bolted windows, while the fireplace was adorned with shells, and a quantity of crinkled paper, like a pink waterfall, flowed down the chimney on to the hearth.

Pearl took off her hat and pulled the thick plait of her hair over one shoulder to retie the ribbon. Then she leaned back in her chair, holding the hat on her knee, with her fair head against the cushion behind her.

Flushed by her walk in the wind, and excited by the admiring eyes she knew were bent upon her, the girl looked positively radiant.

"How did you find poor Mrs. Boscombe, Pearl?" asked Miss Gambol.

"As well as ever," she replied.

"As well as ever?" repeated her hostess. "Why, she's a perfect martyr to ill-health."

"To laziness," observed Pearl.

"I cannot agree with you, my dear," said Miss Gambol. "Mrs. Boscombe is a great sufferer. Perhaps you won't hardly credit it, Mr. Christophers, but Mrs. Boscombe's ankles are as big round as this (holding her hands about a foot apart), what do you say to that?"

Poor Christie, aware of the merry gaze of Pearl, could only murmur feebly that it was too bad.

"If you don't take any exercise, of course you must suffer for it," said Pearl, glancing down at her own pretty feet and ankles. "I've said that to Ettie a dozen times. She ought to stir her mother up. But then I'm not lazy myself, so I suppose I don't understand its temptations."

"A rational amount of exercise is beneficial for everybody," put in Mr. Gambol, who was sitting in the most comfortable chair; "but I've no faith in too much of it.

It is most injudicious to overwork the heart, for instance, or tax the respiratory organs beyond their normal action."

It occurred to Christie, in the minute that his eyes rested on Mr. Gambol's round, shining forehead, that his host was a pompous, ignorant, unpleasant jackass. He rarely made up his mind so quickly about a man, and modified this unflattering opinion in afterthought, but the fact remained that it was his first impression of Mr. Albert Gambol.

"I don't think it hurts anybody to get out of breath," said Pearl, in reply to her host's remarks.

"I said, tax the respiratory organs beyond their normal action," he repeated impressively. "When a person gets out of breath, as you call it, it is Nature's warning that too much strain is being put upon the heart."

"It is generally indigestion," said Christie, bluntly.

"Exactly; but what is indigestion?" questioned Mr. Gambol, like a schoolmaster turning from one pupil to another. "Indigestion is the result of undigested food. In nine cases out of ten, in consequence of partaking of unsuitable food in insufficient quantities."

"Or in over-sufficient quantities," suggested Christie.

"No! There you are wrong," said Mr. Gambol. "If our food is wholesome, plain, and well cooked, it is almost impossible for a healthy person to eat too much."

Christie lifted his eyebrows and Pearl laughed. Mr. Gambol continued his instructive remarks.

"When I say plain, wholesome, and well-cooked food, I don't mean the foreign messes and spirituous liquors in which so many young men indulge"—here he looked severely at the only young man in the room—"but I allude to the good roast beef of old England, the fine-flavoured mutton, and the best pork. That is the plain fare, washed down with pure beer from Kentish hops, that has made us what we are! That is what has made us superior, in every way, to all other nations in the world."

Mr. Gambol, who was rarely so eloquent, looked at his sister, sure of her admiring approval of his patriotic senti

ments. She struck the expected feminine note of finale, the soft chord, as it were, of domestic concurrence.

" I always believe in meat and vegetables, with a plain pudding to follow," she said.

Mr. Gambol smiled. Puddings are but trifling matters, we know, but not unpleasant in recollection.

" I should be quite happy to live on fruit and ices and sponge cake," said Pearl.

The infatuated Christie smiled at her, instantly picturing the lovely girl in the wild Canadian woods he remembered so well, gathering flowers and luscious berries.

" You should never eat uncooked fruit in any quantity, Miss Margrit," he heard Mr. Gambol say solemnly ; " for you will find it spoils your taste for wine."

" I never drink any wine," said Pearl.

" Time enough ! Time enough ! " murmured Mr. Gambol, smiling at her too under his bland eyelids.

Miss Gambol, knowing that her strong views on total abstinence were distasteful to her brother, wisely relapsed into silence. Pearl closed her eyes, plaintively weary, leaning back against her cushion.

Christie felt that he was expected to go, and could think of no excuse in the agitation of his feelings to remain.

Pearl offered to see him out, so they went downstairs alone to the side-door of the house.

" When may I see you again ? " he said, holding her hand much longer than was necessary.

" I don't know, I'm sure," she replied, apparently unconscious of the fact.

" May I see you to-morrow ? No ? Then next week ? " said Christie.

She laughed and cast a lightning glance up the staircase. They were unobserved.

" Very well ! Next week, Mr. Christie."

" May I call upon you ? Here ? "

She pondered seriously for a few seconds, then laughed again and nodded.

"Yes—once. Good-bye!"

She opened the door and he went out, but stopped, hat in hand, looking at her framed in the doorway.

"This has been the most wonderful day of my life!" he said quickly. "Good-bye!"

She did not move, silenced by his expression, but directly he had gone she ran upstairs with a light step, curiously elated and triumphant, singing the chorus of a music-hall song.

CHAPTER XII

FATAL INFATUATION

THERE are many circles in the heaven that we call Illusion, and they all radiate into one another.

When first Felix Christie met the girl named Pearl Henning he saw her as alone in this imaginary heaven, filling it with her beauty and charm; satisfying, by her mere existence, his desire for all that was lovely, and realizing his belief in the perfection of a human being.

In a very little while he understood her as well as it is possible for any man to understand the woman he loves.

She no longer bewildered or amazed him.

He hoped—eternal hope, eternal disappointment—to mould her character to his own, not in any presumptuous or vain spirit, but in his fond desire to make her more happy, to show her a better world than she had ever known, the world of thought and imagination, and to awaken the soul that he believed must dwell in so fair a temple.

It takes many men years of married life to discover a truth that dawned upon Christie before he had known Pearl Henning six months—that it is impossible to influence, against their will, the tastes and disposition of a man or woman.

Pearl made a few attempts to adapt herself to her new friend, little suspecting her utter failure.

At first she was pained, but soon grateful, at the change in his manner after a few weeks of almost daily companionship. He no longer bothered her with serious talk; he left off describing his work—it bored her and she never knew what to say—and he did not offer to lend her any more

of the cheaply bound, uninteresting books that he prized so highly.

She was shocked on learning the small amount of his salary, and roundly abused the unfortunate editor of the dying "Hammersmith Society." Christie's attitude towards money moved the whole Gambol family to mirth, and Pearl to indignation.

"I don't want to be rich," was the casual remark, thoughtlessly uttered, that caused a storm in a teacup.

It was Sunday afternoon. Christie had called, by appointment, to take Miss Henning for a walk, but Miss Gambol, opening the door, insisted on conveying him to the heavily furnished drawing-room.

Pearl was sitting in an arm-chair reading the literary supplement of one of the Buckley papers, and greeted him with well-feigned surprise.

"Quite a stranger!" said the hospitable Mr. Gambol.

Christie stared at them.

"You expected me, didn't you?" he said. "I thought I was invited. I understood from Miss Henning——"

"Please don't say that you understood anything from me, Mr. Christie," interrupted the girl, and she smiled expressively, pouting her lips.

He saw that she wished him for some reason not to mention the appointment, so promptly changed the subject.

"I see that you patronize a Buckley journal," he said, sitting down beside her and touching the paper in her hand. "I've heard all about these 'literary supplements' from a man I know named Millidew. He works for the Buckley firm."

"Does he write stories?" asked Pearl.

"No, he scribbles with the pencil instead of the pen," replied Christie, making her blush by the frank admiration and happiness in his eyes.

"Fine Art is a lucrative profession if you can hit the public taste," observed Mr. Gambol.

"Think what a man can earn who models anything like

this ! " added his sister, displaying her latest purchase, a hideous white china pug-dog, dotted with pink rosebuds.

" Isn't he sweet ? " exclaimed Pearl, kissing the impossible pug.

" I can't see the object of grafting roses on his skin," said Christie.

" There's such a thing as literary licence," said Mr. Gambol. " I suppose the same thing applies to Art, which explains the pink rosebuds."

" It's as foolish as making a wig with golden curls in front and black ringlets behind," said Christie ; " or dyeing one side of a man's whiskers blonde and the other side magenta."

Mr. Gambol frowned severely. He disapproved of light handling of serious subjects.

" What does it matter whether it's like a dog or not, so long as it's pretty and people buy it ? " said Pearl, returning to the subject of the china pug.

" But it's such a ridiculous way to make money," protested Christie.

" I say again, that doesn't matter," rejoined Pearl. " The great thing in this world is to make it—make it ! "

She kissed the pug once more and looked bewitching, but her voice was hard and determined. It was then that Christie ventured on the speech that ended with the words, " I don't want to be rich."

Mr. Gambol talked to him sternly, for a young man who could make a joke about a wig of different-coloured hair, or hint at the enormity of dyeing a gentleman's whiskers magenta, was in a mental condition, to quote the tonsorial artist's own words, " bordering on the confines of the vicious or feeble-minded."

Miss Gambol supported her brother's arguments. Son Gambol and the twins asked indignantly, without pausing for a reply, if Mr. Christie lived in the workhouse and wanted everybody to be dirty tramps.

Christie stoutly defended his thoughtless remark, fired

to eloquence by the peculiar expression on Pearl's face.

She watched him earnestly—he thought, proudly; but her lips, usually open, were pressed together into a thin line that spoilt their beauty, and, after a while, her eyelids drooped and she became absorbed in her own thoughts.

When they were alone together for a few minutes, after tea, he begged her to fulfil her promise to go out.

"Not to-day, 'John Tompkins,' thank you!" she answered coldly.

"Why John Tompkins?" he questioned.

"Because you remind me of a piece of poetry we learned at home when we were children," said Pearl. "It began—

> "'Honest John Tompkins was a hedger and ditcher,
> Who, though he was poor, didn't wish to be richer!'"

"You mustn't take me too seriously, Pearl."

"I don't take you seriously."

"Of course I mean to get rich, for your sake."

"You!" said Pearl scornfully. "I'm afraid I haven't much faith in pens and ink."

"It isn't necessary," said Christie, and he suddenly caught her by the shoulders and held her firmly. "Have you faith in the man?"

She laughed and curved her pretty throat to one side, making no effort for freedom.

"How beautiful you are!" exclaimed the young man. "How lovely you are! You angel!"

He relaxed his hold and folded his arms over his chest, as if he hardly dared to touch her.

She instantly moved away, laughing and still curving her throat from side to side, like a bird making ready to preen.

"You're only an honest John Tompkins, but I think I'll go out with you, after all," she said.

"You angel!" exclaimed Christie for the second time.

They usually walked in Kensington Gardens, but Pearl

was always anxious, if she could spare time, to go to see Ettie Boscombe.

She liked the Mus Doc, and poor Mrs. Poole, who flattered her, and enjoyed Mrs. Boscombe's small gossip and scandal, that Christie and Ettie unconsciously checked by their mere presence.

She had yet another admirer in the dingy house in Waterloo Road—a somewhat ludicrous admirer, it is true, but still a man—no other than Professor Wiggins, of the Borough.

Christie's old friend had tired of colonial life, saved and borrowed enough money to bring him back to his native shores, and was happily settled in the top floor back.

" First we had a genus of the fiddle in Mr. Christie," said the Mus Doc ; " and now we've got a genus of the pianoforte."

Wiggins had greeted his First Violin of the old days with effusive affection, and literally wept over the story of the overworked arm. He gave a characteristic account of Christie's friends in the little town of Mapleville, assuring him that old Monsieur Batiste was as frisky as a lamb and Mrs. Christie as blooming as a rose.

Professor Wiggins raved over Pearl from the day of their introduction, and Pearl, to Ettie's unspeakable amazement, seemed to be flattered and to enjoy his society. She remonstrated with her friend.

" I don't think it is quite fair to Professor Wiggins, even though he is an absurd little man, to encourage him, dear," said Ettie.

" I really don't know what you mean," answered Pearl, opening her wide eyes a little wider.

" Oh, Pearl, don't be so innocent ! We're all alone ! " exclaimed Ettie.

The two girls looked at each other gravely for a second, then they exchanged the smile of feminine freemasonry.

" No, but honestly, I don't care a brass farthing for little Wiggins," said Pearl indignantly, as if her friend had

spoken again. "I hope I've got better taste than to like that ugly little wretch."

"Then why do you flirt with him?" asked Ettie bluntly.

"'*Pour passy le tomp!*'" replied Pearl, quoting Mr. Gambol.

"It isn't right, Pearl," began Ettie, trying to be severe.

"You said that just like Chris!" interrupted her friend. "That's the way he speaks when he's in an instructive mood. How he can talk! You wouldn't believe it, would you, to see him in a drawing-room? Miss Gambol doesn't think he's got any conversation. I'm quite ashamed of him sometimes, sitting there without opening his mouth, just because Mr. Gambol doesn't agree with all his mad ideas."

"Chris is never sullen," said Ettie.

"Not exactly sullen," Pearl argued, "but what I call stuck up. Too proud to make himself agreeable. Of course he's got nice manners. He opens the door for you, and takes off his hat, and all that sort of thing, but Mr. Gambol hit the nail on the head when he said that Chris ought to be more affable, considering his monetary position."

"I can't see what his monetary position has to do with his affability," said Ettie, smiling.

"Can't you? Well, a young fellow without any fortune or prospects ought to conciliate a man like Mr. Gambol, for instance, but I don't believe that Chris cares a hang for his good opinion. He pretends to be indifferent to wealth and position, but he can run after rich people fast enough when it suits him."

"Oh, Pearl!" said Ettie.

"Well, look at that violinist, Martelli, he makes such a fuss about," urged Pearl. "I'm sure he's awfully rich, and I believe Chris would tie up his boots for him! He's so inconsistent. Ned Millidew could get him an introduction to Mr. Buckley, the man who owns all the newspapers in London—well, nearly all of 'em—but Chris says he

doesn't want it. Doesn't want it! Mr. Buckley! Why, he ought to be ready to creep there on his hands and knees."

This was news to Ettie Boscombe. At the first opportunity she questioned Christie about the introduction to the great pressman.

"Yes, it's quite true," said Christie. "Ned has made friends with him lately. I could probably get a job. Perhaps I'm wrong to hesitate—Pearl can't understand it, Ettie—but I positively dread the Buckley wheel."

"What do you mean by the Buckley wheel?" she asked.

"The great organization that Mr. Charles Buckley manages so ably," he replied. "I always think of it as a huge, spiked wheel, perpetually whirling and flinging out endless newspapers to all parts of London, some of them wide sheets, some of them little gossipy notes, but all inky and many splashed with gall. The wheel never stops, for it is oiled with brains and energy, and on the tip of every spike, pushing off the bits of paper, is a man or a woman, with crowds of other men and women close behind them. Liquid gold oozes out of the whole machine, but the unfortunate people on the spikes only get a few drops at a time, as the stream runs down into the Buckley coffers underneath."

"Why don't you try to put a spoke in the wheel, making use of it for the benefit of your own work?" said Ettie, laughing.

"Impossible! When a man is flung on to the thing and has the good luck to be caught, his originality only goes to lubricate the wheel. I don't say the position is without its advantages. He soon grows accustomed to the whirl of the wheel and he is always sure of his bread. That's the point that appeals to Pearl. She thinks I'm a fool to trust to my pen. Everything she says is so true! I've had no training, and Buckley's could give it to me. I've already made a failure of one career. I can only write about commonplace things. Advise me, Ettie! Tell me what to do. You're always right."

She did not answer for a few seconds, but sat immovable, her eyes on his face, with the sweet serenity he knew so well. It had grown out of the day when he first gave her his confidence.

"Dear Felix," she said very quietly, "will you forgive me if I ask you a serious question?"

"Oh yes."

He guessed what she wanted to say, but he little knew what an effort the words cost.

"No one could see you and Pearl together without——" she hesitated, paused, and began the sentence again. "I know that Pearl is very lovely and very sweet, but for you—for you, Felix! Is it too late to think of the future, for both your sakes? For hers, as well as yours?"

"I know what you mean," he said, and began to pace up and down the room.

Ettie leaned back in her chair as if she were very tired. After a few minutes he sat down again beside her.

"It is too late!" he said. "I love her too much. I love her with all my soul. She is going to marry me. You mustn't speak of it yet to anybody. She plays with me, fast and loose, Ettie, but she has promised to marry me."

There was no surprise in Ettie's face, but he did not heed her. He rose again and paced the floor.

"What a traitor I am to listen to any inner voice that doesn't tell me I am the most fortunate of men!" he burst out. "I am always unworthy of my Pearl, but when this doubt—this misery—seizes me, I deserve to be shot! Ettie! Ettie! Why can't I be happy, supremely happy, like any other fellow when the girl he loves confesses that she loves him?"

"I expected that you would be supremely happy," she answered.

"I am—when Pearl is with me," he said. "But directly she goes away I am simply wretched. I doubt myself. I

doubt her. I doubt my own love. I must have her always, or never! I can't live without her."

He stopped abruptly beside Ettie's chair, stooping over her.

"Forgive me, Ettie! I'm raving like a madman—no, like a lover, it's the same thing. Now you see, don't you, how such a trifle as an introduction to Buckley may affect my future? You know that I've sold all my little character sketches and half a dozen short stories, but I can hardly make enough money to buy Pearl's gloves."

"I see that you will ultimately take the introduction and accept any work in the Buckley wheel that he can be induced to give you," said Ettie.

"There's a cruel tone of finality about that," said Christie. "You give me Pearl's advice in other words."

"Because you will only take Pearl's advice, not mine."

She spoke the truth.

On the following day, with Millidew's card for his "Open Sesame," Felix Christie turned his steps towards, not the cave of the Forty Thieves, but the premises of Buckley and Company, Limited.

He found Buckley's in one of those old streets whose very names are reminiscent of ancient days, and incongruous in our modern city.

A huge block of grey stone buildings, with its rows of bare windows and small, prison-like doors, gave Christie an impression of dull, uninteresting toil. The single word "Buckley's" appeared in gigantic gold letters on the walls, and, diminutive in size, on the lower windows of the houses.

There was a small office at the end of the yard which led to Buckley's, labelled "Inquiries," in which a thin, melancholy man, with the magic word on his coat-collar, was reading a Buckley evening paper, and stared at Christie for several seconds before answering his questions.

It occurred to the caller that he looked like a literary genius, run to seed, who perchance had mocked at the great firm in his youth and was condemned in consequence

to eternal imprisonment in a glass case, reading the same extra special edition of Buckley's evening paper for ever more.

Finding that Christie did not shrivel under his gaze—apparently not realizing the enormity of asking for Mr. Buckley without an appointment—the melancholy man slowly pointed with his thumb towards the first door on the right-hand side of the courtyard.

He leaned out of his little prison, when Christie boldly walked on, looking after him, as if he expected a thunderbolt to be hurled from an upper window at the presumptuous stranger.

Inside the door indicated by the thin, melancholy man was a similar cage to his own, but occupied by a very stout man, also labelled " Buckley's " on the collar.

" Mr. Buckley isn't in town," he said, to Christie's great disappointment. " I suppose you'd like to see Mr. Ferguson ? "

" Who is Mr. Ferguson ? " asked Christie.

The expression of mingled surprise and horror at the ignorance displayed by such a question, which he had already seen on the face of the man outside, was reproduced at these words on the face of the man inside.

" Don't know Mr. Ferguson ? " he said. " Why, he's Mr. Buckley's manager."

" Then I'll see him, by all means."

Millidew's card, introducing Mr. Felix Christie, was accordingly sent in to Mr. Ferguson, and Christie endeavoured to beguile the nervous minutes of waiting by talk with the doorkeeper.

" Fine afternoon, isn't it ? " he said.

" Fine ? " repeated the doorkeeper, who looked, in his little office, like a fat spider who had spun himself too small a web. " It's too windy to suit me."

" But it's bright and sunny," observed the other.

The doorkeeper thought it over before replying.

" Too sunny for my taste."

"At all events, it's seasonable!" said Christie desperately.

"Ah! That's all that can be said for it," rejoined the doorkeeper.

The boy who had taken in the card returned, at this minute of deadlock in the conversation, with a request to the visitor to "step this way."

The way took many steps, upstairs and along passages, ending at a door with "Mr. Alexander Ferguson, Private," printed in white paint in the centre.

The boy tapped, a voice within growled, and Christie entered.

He found himself in a small, uncomfortable room, crowded with heavy office furniture, the light of a dull window, overlooking other dull windows, partially blocked out by a big, roller-top desk. The walls were hung with original drawings, including some of Millidew's early efforts, their effect spoilt by a huge poster, hot from the press, that proclaimed in flaming red letters Buckley's latest One Thousand Pounds Prize.

There were newspapers and books everywhere, as if somebody had opened the door and flung them in haphazard. Christie observed all these things in the minute of his entrance. Then he saw that there were two men in the room, evidently engaged in very interesting conversation.

One of them, who was seated at the desk, he identified as Mr. Alexander Ferguson, for his appearance was as Scotch as his name. A lank, sandy man, this Aberdonian, with high cheek-bones, good, shrewd, grey eyes, a big nose, and straggling moustache; a man of forty-five or fifty, dressed in a rough tweed suit, with a faded flower in his buttonhole.

His companion, who was leaning an elbow on the top of the writing-desk and held a cigarette between his gloved fingers, was a young fellow of about Christie's own age, a Piccadilly man, who suggested a Dana Gibson drawing

without its exaggeration, as faultless in grooming as Mr. Ferguson was careless.

They were both laughing as Christie entered, but checked their mirth and looked at him, the Scotchman's good humour changing to a somewhat dour expression, but the younger man still showing his white teeth in an amused smile.

"Mr. Ferguson?" said Christie, advancing to the desk.

"That is my name," said Mr. Buckley's manager, as if he acknowledged the fact grudgingly and might see fit to deny it later on.

The Piccadilly young man, who mistook the natural diffidence of the stranger for nervousness, took up a newspaper and began to read, courteously oblivious of the interview, but he still remained leaning on the top of the desk and smoking.

"What can I do for you, Mr.——" Ferguson, who had mislaid Millidew's card, searched for it vaguely among the letters and memoranda before him.

"Christie," said the caller, supplying the lost name.

"Mr. Christie—what can I do for you?" he repeated.

There were many things in the room to discourage and alarm the literary beginner: an open drawer in the desk, for instance, vomiting letters and ticketed in painfully plain handwriting, "Applications for Employment"; Mr. Ferguson's habit of looking at the ceiling and the door alternately, as if he were going to fly or run away; the ticking of a clock, half hidden on the mantelpiece, that seemed to say the words, "Be quick—be quick—be quick!" in endless repetition; but Christie was wholly undaunted.

He felt himself at the hub of the wheel, and asked, in his quiet, cool, Canadian inexperience, for one of the many gifts of fortune it was in the power of Buckley's to bestow.

"But we don't require unlimited editors, sub-editors, authors, and journalists!" said Mr. Ferguson. "I know

nothing of your capacity for any of these posts, even if I had one to offer, Mr. Christie."

His voice was soft and monotonous, still retaining the inflexion of his youth, in spite of twenty-five years as a London journalist. Now and again he made effective use of a Scotch expression.

He stared at the visitor very much as the outside and inside doorkeepers had stared at him downstairs.

Christie asked for a trial—an opportunity—he spoke more quickly and fluently, pricked by the Scotchman's indifference.

" Buckley's is the place for new men—everybody tells me that ! " he said. " It's true that I can't give you a packet of references, but I can give you good stuff. You have already accepted every single line I've sent in to any of your papers. I didn't come here to blow about myself " —he unconsciously dropped into the slang of his boyhood— " I don't want to give you too much of my lip, but I offer you all my time, such originality and talent as I possess, absolute devotion to the firm, and all I ask is a bare living. You must be able to do something for me, if you choose, Mr. Ferguson ! "

" No, we've so many writers here now, we can hardly turn round for them," began Mr. Ferguson.

" Only give me a chance to earn my bread in any way you like, and I'll bide my time to prove I can write. Say ! Your windows want cleaning. Let me come and clean them to-morrow morning. That'll be a start anyway— and I should be proud to let a little light and fresh air into Buckley's ! "

The young man leaning on the desk, who had involuntarily raised his eyes from the newspaper at this rush of words, burst out laughing.

Mr. Ferguson, however, could see nothing to laugh about. He had met with a great many varieties of young men, some of them as mad as his present visitor, but he had never encouraged them. He believed in the survival of

the fittest, and prided himself on the difficulties and obstacles to be overcome by every youth who approached Buckley's.

"Thank you, Mr. Christie," he said, laying his hand on the bell and gazing at the door. "We do not require any window-cleaning, neither do we require more sub-editors. As for your previous offer of articles and sketches, we do not want anything of that sort just now, and we shall not want any in the future."

"Never?" said Christie.

"Never!" said Mr. Ferguson.

As he said the last word he looked his visitor straight in the face, and the absurd solemnity of this question and answer struck them both at the same instant.

Christie's mouth twitched. The Scotchman's long face relaxed. They bowed gravely to each other. The young man with the newspaper, who had watched the little scene, laughed again loudly and boyishly.

"Wait a minute, Ferguson!" he exclaimed, speaking for the first time, and stopping the manager from ringing his bell. "I should like to have a look at some of Mr. Christie's literary attempts, as I am not to have the pleasure of seeing him clean the windows. I've never heard of combining the two professions. It might interest the chief. He believes in versatility, you know. Have you brought any samples of the literary branch of your business?"

Though he spoke with a certain insolence, taking stock of Christie as he seated himself in the only other chair in the room, there was something so pleasing in his handsome face, he was so young and frankly interested, that it was impossible to take offence at his words or the way they were uttered.

Mr. Ferguson shrugged his shoulders and fidgeted with the papers on his table.

"I'm sorry to say I haven't brought any samples," answered Christie, amused and surprised at this unex-

pected turn of events. "The best things I have done yet were six articles called 'London Dawns,' they were published in the 'Orb'——"

"By Jove!" interrupted the handsome young man. "Did you really write 'London Dawns'? They were capital—thundering good stuff. I liked that one of the old chap at Walworth—was it Walworth?—and that other one about the feeble-minded little boy. My father was delighted with the whole lot."

"This is Mr. Buckley's son," put in Mr. Ferguson, not so much for Christie's information, but as a protest against young Buckley's assumption that everybody knew him.

"You should have told us that you were the man who wrote those articles," he continued. "It was my father who drew my attention to them. He generally edits my papers for me. I've got so little time."

"Michty me!" murmured Mr. Ferguson.

"Why don't you do some more of that kind of thing?" young Buckley went on, jumping up from his chair and taking Christie by the lapel of his coat. "It's glorious, you know! So true to life—touching—funny—and so short. That's what appealed to the chief, Ferguson. You know he always says the public can't have too little of a good thing. They exemplified what he calls the fine art of omission."

"I didn't read Mr. Christie's articles," said Ferguson.

"You must!" exclaimed young Buckley eagerly. "Tell your boy to look them out on the file now—you know the dates, don't you, Mr. Christie? Let me see——"

"My dear boy, I can't afford time just now," protested the manager. "I'll look them up to-morrow. I won't forget. I had no idea we had had anything important from Mr. Christie. You didn't put your case well, Mr. Christie. You led me to suppose you were a literary man in anticipation only. You should have mentioned your little series in the 'Orb' at once. We're always glad to look at original work. That's what we want at Buckley's,

witty, brilliant, original work. We're ready to pay any amount of money to get it—in reason, that is, and according to our usual rates," he concluded emphatically.

"Where do you come across all your quaint people?" young Buckley asked Christie. "I suppose you've got any number more of them up your sleeve. Look here! I'm sure Mr. Ferguson wants to be rid of us both. Come out with me! I want you to tell me all sorts of things. Will you?"

"Of course I will," said the other, charmed with his boyish enthusiasm.

Mr. Ferguson gave a sigh of relief. He offered his hand cordially to Christie, partly on account of his articles in the "Orb," partly on account of his altered prospects, for any man who made friends with young Buckley was sure of a welcome from the head of the firm. It was an open secret that Mr. Charles Buckley idolized his two sons.

"I will think over our little chat, Mr. Christie," said the manager, as if they had just concluded the most delightful and friendly interview. "We shall probably be able to put something in your way. You must send me a line or call again. Very pleased to have seen you. Good morning!"

He closed the door on his callers and returned to his desk. His eye happened to fall on Millidew's mislaid card, and he took it up.

"'Felix Christie,'" he read. "Well, he's a decent lad, if one can judge by a face—a very decent lad—wi' an unco fine head on him too, but I will not let him know I think so."

CHAPTER XIII

YOUNG BUCKLEY

YOUNG Buckley put his arm through his new friend's as they went out of the building together.

"I feel just as if I had known you before, Mr. Christie," he said, returning the obsequious salute of the stout doorkeeper by a careless nod.

"This is not the first time we have met," said Christie, with a sudden flash of recollection. "When I went into Mr. Ferguson's room I seemed to remember you, but it slipped my memory till now. Yes, I'm sure I'm not mistaken."

He turned his face towards his companion. They looked at each other closely.

"Wait a minute!" said Christie, as the other was about to speak. "I'll tell you your Christian name, although Mr. Ferguson didn't mention it, and I had never heard that Mr. Buckley had a son. Your friends call you Hawley—Hawton—no! Houghton! That's it. Houghton."

"By Jove!" exclaimed his companion. "You're quite right. My name is Houghton Charles Buckley. You must have heard it from somebody, and forgotten."

"I did hear it, but I didn't forget. One night in Piccadilly, over two years ago, I saw you going into the Nonpareil Restaurant, with a lady and another man. You stumbled up against me by accident. The lady spoke to you over her shoulder. 'Come along, Houghton!' she said. Now do you remember?"

Young Buckley was silent for a few seconds, cudgelling his brains.

"No!" he said, shaking his head. "No! I went up to Cambridge two years ago, and I recollect being in London at the time you say, but I can't be sure of the lady or the restaurant. I know such a crowd of people and go to so many places. There couldn't have been anything special about that night, or perhaps I should remember it."

"There happened to be something special about it for me," said Christie.

It was the night of the broken strings, when he had tramped the streets with Ettie Boscombe. He could never think of it without a feeling of gratitude and tenderness for Ettie that was shadowed, in some mysterious way, with pain, unaccountable in that it had nothing to do with the end of his dream of music, but because it moved him to a vague sense of loss, as if some secret promise of that night had never been fulfilled.

"Come along, old man!" said his companion, and Christie quickened his pace and banished the shadow from his mind.

Mr. Houghton Buckley was a great talker. Christie was soon accustomed to his superlatives, and not a little amused to find himself treated, after an hour's acquaintance, like an old friend.

"You see, I'm a judge of character," said Houghton, when he jestingly spoke of this. "I know whether I shall care about a fellow directly I talk to him."

"Can you always rely on your first impression?" said Christie.

"Not always," said the other, with a laugh. "I've been shamefully taken in before now, but never by the same man twice. I'll tell you a good story, though it's against myself, about a little sweep who sold me a polo pony. D'you play polo?"

"No."

"Oh, you should! What do you do with yourself all day and night? You can't be perpetually hunting up types for your sketches."

He had forgotten all about the little sweep who had sold him the pony, and asked his companion a string of questions, frankly curious, but without impertinence, about his way of living.

They had walked the whole length of the street of adventure—Fleet Street—from Ludgate Circus to the Strand, before Houghton had finished his good-humoured cross-examination.

"You're very like me in one thing," he said. "You seem absolutely at home in the busiest streets. It's strange for a Canadian from a backwoods town, isn't it?"

"I think it is," answered Christie; "but I took to London like a duck takes to water. The houses might be trees, the pavements might be grass, and the people might be buzzing insects for all I care."

"But you seem to notice everything at the same time."

"Yes, but not consciously," said Christie; "I often find, when I think over my day, that a little scene, or an odd character, will suddenly flash into remembrance as clearly as if I had given it deliberate study, instead of a passing glance."

"Which way do you go?" said Houghton, when they reached Charing Cross; then, without waiting for an answer, "Come along to our house, and I'll show you those prints of old London we were talking about. Hansom!"

He lifted his finger as a signal to the driver, and, following Christie into the cab, gave an address near Grosvenor Square.

"Do you know," said Christie, "this is only the second time I've been in a cab since I came to England?"

"Why do you object to cabs?" asked Houghton, in surprise.

"I don't object to them. I like them very much."

"Then why in the world——" began Buckley again.

"Where I have lived, in Waterloo Road, we should no more think of whistling for a hansom than we should for an airship," answered Christie, smiling. "Our only chance

of having a drive is when there's a funeral in the family. Even a wedding—the daughter of my landlady in Hammersmith was married last Sunday—hardly justifies the extravagance of a carriage, although we had one, let me tell you. It held five grown-up people, three children, and a baby. I know it was a tight fit, for I was one of 'em, being an invited guest."

Houghton laughed in his boyish way, but quickly became serious again and was silent for a minute, leaning back in the seat, looking at his companion.

"It's very fine in theory to be hard up and fight the battle of life, and all that sort of thing," he said; "but I'm afraid it's devilish uncomfortable in fact, isn't it?"

"Yes!" said Christie promptly. "But, speaking personally, I never cared a cent until lately whether I had any money or not; but now——"

He stopped abruptly, thinking of Pearl Henning and the poverty that stood between them.

"Now we must keep Alick Ferguson up to the mark!" Houghton finished the sentence for him; "he can give you lots to do. Ours is the firm a man of your ability ought to get hold of; that is to say, between ourselves, you're the man that Buckley's wants to get hold of. It isn't quite the same thing, eh? Old Ferguson would contradict me. It's his private opinion, though he wouldn't confess it, that we could get on very well indeed without any new writers, but they couldn't get on without us. You should hear him hold forth on the two B's—Bannockburn and Buckley's—here we are!"

The cab stopped at a big house in Temple Street, with window-boxes full of flowers, a door painted bright green, and silk blinds a paler shade of the same colour. It was a broad, fashionable road, of solid and expensive mansions.

Houghton opened the door with his latchkey and admitted Christie to a square hall, rather dark, but of good proportions, leading to a flight of broad, polished oak stairs, with wrought-iron banisters of most graceful design.

The walls were covered with green draperies embroidered in gold and blue. Several electric lamps, already lighted although it was early in the afternoon, looked like balls of jasper hanging from gold threads.

A man appeared at the sound of the door from the other end of the hall, advancing ponderously to see what was the matter. It was the butler, whose appearance made Christie think of a particularly stout ogre who had taken possession of this beautiful house during the absence of its young master.

"Is Mrs. Buckley at home, Court?" said Houghton.

"No, sir," replied the butler. "She's out driving with Miss Houghton and Mr. Joseph."

"Has *he* gone with them?" asked Houghton, stopping half-way up the stairs.

"Yes, sir. He ran downstairs very quick just before the carriage came round. 'Tell them I've gone out, Court,' he said, and was taking his hat and stick when Miss Houghton called to him that she wanted him to go along with them. Mr. Joseph said something under his breath—I've no idea what it was, sir, I didn't catch it—and went upstairs again, very slow."

Houghton smiled, but did not speak until the butler was out of hearing.

"Poor old Joe!" he exclaimed. "There's nothing he hates more than driving round and round the Park, but he's doing so at this minute, with my mother and my aunt. Another second and he would have escaped, by what Court says, and that will add to the aggravation. Joe is my brother," he continued. "He's a couple of years younger than I am. Yes, this staircase is an awfully fine bit of work, isn't it? It is Italian, eighteenth-century. My father had it put in when he took the house. This sort of thing is one of his many hobbies."

The last part of his speech was in reference to Christie's evident admiration of the beautiful scroll-work of the wrought-iron banisters.

"I've never seen such a fine house!" said the young Canadian, simply.

"This is the room I wanted to show you, old man," said Houghton, with his good-natured laugh, laying a hand on his guest's shoulder.

It was a small room on the third floor, furnished as a study, with green leather-covered chairs—green was evidently the favourite colour of the master or the mistress of the house—a square writing-table, and high, old-fashioned bookcases with glass doors.

Hanging on the walls, uniformly framed in brown wood on mats of the same shade, was the collection of prints of old London which Houghton had mentioned.

"Here's your favourite spot!" he cried. "'Waterloo Bridge in 1858.' Look at the chap in a sort of smock-frock and gaiters, leaning over the balustrade, listening to Big Ben in the distance. That's the Felix Christie of fifty years ago, dreaming how he'll conquer Westminster. Is that one of your dreams, Mr. Christie? Have you ever thought of going into politics?"

Christie laughed and shook his head.

"I wish I could say it was one of mine," Houghton rattled on, sitting on a corner of the writing-table while his guest looked at the prints. "Nothing would give my people greater pleasure. My father is particularly keen. It will be more in Joe's line, perhaps, when he's old enough. I want to go into our firm. Business is in my blood. All my mother's family are business men. Wholesale, of course. Her name was Houghton before she was married. Sir Joseph Houghton, the shipbuilder, you know—Houghton and Sons, Newcastle—is her eldest brother. Another of my uncles, Robert Houghton, is in wool. Another one, Uncle Phil, is really the Only Real Cocoa on Earth."

"What sort of a man is a 'Real Cocoa'?" asked his guest, who was interested in strange slang.

"You must have seen the advertisements—'Drink the

Only Real Cocoa on Earth ' ! " exclaimed Houghton. " I mean that my uncle is the head of the Real Cocoa Company. Chairman of the board of directors I ought to have said. They're whipping all the other people out of the market. I'm awfully keen on cocoa myself."

" I very rarely drink it," said Christie, innocently.

Houghton stared at him and then laughed.

" I should hope not, old man ! I meant that I was keen on the business, but I mustn't think of it yet awhile. I must devote myself to Buckley's. That's a ripping old thing you're looking at now. My father picked it up only the other day at a little shop in Maiden Lane. Most of the print-dealers know about his collection and give him the first refusal of anything good they get hold of. He had an enormous number at one time, but he's weeding them out and only keeps the very best. There are several hanging in his office in the City. He's as great a London-lover as you are—more so, perhaps, for he was born and has lived here nearly all his life. He travelled a good bit when he was a young man, but he seems to get more attached to London every year. He's in Berlin just now, but we shall have him back again as soon as he can get through his business."

" I wonder whether one's tastes always change with years," said Christie, poring over a quaint old print of Kensington Palace in the days of Queen Anne.

" I hope so ! " exclaimed Houghton. " My own tastes change with every season. I never admire the same thing two years running."

" Awkward in some circumstances," observed Christie, passing on to a scene in Rotten Row, with ladies in riding-habits that swept the ground.

" For instance ? " said Houghton.

" Well, supposing one were married."

" Oh, I was thinking of pleasures, not of marriage ! " answered Houghton. " I look on marriage in the same light as business. Of course you must stick, if you want to

make a success of it. But you and I are not married—at least, I'm not."

"Nor I," said Christie.

"Don't mean to be for many a long day," continued Houghton, snapping open his gold cigarette-case with decision and offering it to his companion.

"You spoke of your uncle being at Newcastle," said Christie, referring to his previous words. "I have a very good friend who lives at Newcastle—a Mr. Pargetter."

"Henry Pargetter?" asked Houghton, with great interest. "The head of Pargetter-Smith's?"

"Yes, he's a manufacturer. Do you know his boilers?"

"Do I know the Pargetter-Smith boilers?" repeated Houghton, as if he were speaking of his dearest friends. "Why, I've known them all my life. Pargetter's a grand old boy, isn't he? Have you met Mrs. Pargetter? There's a big family. Crowds of them! I haven't seen any of the girls for years. The eldest son is at Cambridge, and the second boy has just gone into the Navy. To think you should know old boiler-buster, as Joe and I used to call him! I wonder whether we've got any other mutual friends? I suppose you don't know Ted Forrester, do you? Man with little eyes. Or Percy Andrews? Or Jack Bray, Lord Hetherington's second son? Or the Osgoods, or little Mrs. McRaye?"

"You forget, Mr. Buckley, that I'm a poor Canuck, living in the wilds of Hammersmith," laughed Christie. "I know nothing of Society."

"And I don't suppose you want to!" said Houghton, shrewdly. "Haven't you done with those old prints yet? Save the rest of 'em for another day."

He looked at his watch and gave an exclamation.

"It's past five o'clock! I promised to meet a man at my club at half-past four! By the way, my mother rarely comes in till late, or she would have given you some tea. I hope you'll meet her some other day. Now come and have a drink."

Christie apologized for the length of his visit.

"Not at all, old man. Delighted to have met you!" said Houghton, and led the way downstairs.

He stopped at the first floor.

"Would you care to see the latest portrait of my father? By Savage, you know. It's just back from the Academy. Perhaps you saw it there? It was on the line, left-hand side of the first room."

"No, I didn't go to the Academy."

Houghton opened one of the doors of the drawing-room. It was very light and lofty, decorated in the palest shade of lilac, with polished floors and old French furniture. The only flowers were carnations and lilies in silver bowls, and the only ornaments a pair of big Sèvres vases on the white marble mantelpiece in the front room, and a group of exquisite Dresden shepherds and shepherdesses in the back room.

There were several landscapes hanging on the walls, but the instant one entered the room his attention was arrested by the striking portrait of the master of the house.

The work of an artist famous both for his courage and his skill, it was one of those portraits that startle and fascinate the beholder, as characteristic of the painter as of his subject: absolutely realistic; strong, virile, but imaginative at the same time; keen and discriminating, just and merciless.

Christie saw that Charles Buckley, of Buckley's, was a younger-looking man than he had expected, in spite of the grey beard and moustache, the former closely trimmed to the shape of the face, the latter slightly pointed and not hiding the mouth; the eyes were dark and noticeably bright—he felt that they were restless, moody eyes—and the hair, parted down the centre, was fine, grey, and straight.

He was represented seated at a desk, with one hand holding a book, and the other, on which the artist had painted a heavy gold ring set with a ruby, clenched against his cheek. The hands were very fine and veined, the fore-

head wrinkled, and the complexion sallow, but if this suggested ill-health it was contradicted by the obvious strength and vigour of the upright, alert pose.

"Is it good?" said Christie, bluntly.

"Splendid! Ripping!" answered Houghton. "It's almost too good, don't you know? My father gives one the same impression as the portrait—as if he would like to rest, to read, to think, but he can't. He's always too busy."

It occurred to Christie, for the first time, that perhaps Buckley himself was also whirling round, against his will, on the Buckley wheel.

"You don't resemble your father," he said, glancing from the worn, wrinkled face on the wall to the handsome youth at his side.

"Not a bit! I'm a Houghton all over. Joe is more like him, but he's an irritable, discontented little beggar, and my father is the most self-controlled, agreeable man I ever came across. I don't think he has got such a thing as a temper."

"Or he has mastered it?" suggested Christie, with a last glance at the firm, thin lips in the portrait.

"I believe you're right," said Houghton.

As the two young men were leaving the house a carriage stopped at the door. There was a middle-aged lady in it, alone, sitting very upright, with a small white Pomeranian, like a ball of fluff, on her knee.

Houghton lifted his hat and stepped forward to speak to her, while Christie waited at a little distance.

"I left Aunt Ellen at Lady Wilton's, and Joe insisted on walking from Hyde Park Corner, so Pom and I had to come home alone," were the lady's words of greeting in a severe, dragging voice, as if it cost her an effort to speak.

"I'm sorry, mother," answered her son, taking the ball of fluff she passed over to him.

"It isn't of the least importance"—her tone implied

that it was of the greatest. "Who is the young man in the peculiar hat?"

"I met him at the office," said Houghton, with a quick glance at Christie's soft, cheap hat. "He's a queer, silent fellow. I should like to introduce him to you."

"My dear Houghton!" protested Mrs. Buckley, and she walked slowly up the steps into the house, without another word, leaving her son no alternative but to give the Pomeranian to the footman and take his new friend away.

CHAPTER XIV

PEARL'S REFLECTIONS

MR. GAMBOL was re-arranging what he called his pictorial advertisements.

There were no pictures, but he always used those words. That is to say, Mr. Gambol superintended the re-arrangement, his son and one of the young barbers doing the work.

Tom Gambol (described by Miss Pearl Henning, in a previous chapter, as a lumbering elephant) gave his assistance with the dogged ill-temper and clumsiness that young gentlemen of fifteen, working under the parental eye, occasionally assume. The young barber, anxious to curry favour with his master, jumped up and down the flight of steps, polished the frames, and extolled the pictorial advertisements with enthusiasm.

"We will hang the 'Rose Leaf Complexion Wafers' on a level with the 'Art Eyelashes,' Tom," said Mr. Gambol. "Hold the steps steady while Partridge flies aloft."

This was a joke which the master of the establishment had made on an average three or four times a day since engaging the services of the young barber of that name.

"What's an Art Eyelash?" asked young Tom.

"I should think the words explained themselves," answered his father severely. "We have just received a consignment from Messrs. Grotto and James."

"They are beautiful, long, curly, not to be detected on the closest inspection," said Partridge, quoting Messrs. Grotto and James.

"This large white card," continued Mr. Gambol, when

the Complexion Wafers and the Art Eyelashes had been hung to his satisfaction, "we will place on the opposite wall. It is hardly in such good taste as our other pictorials, but it will strike the eye of the customer directly he opens the door."

"What if the customer happens to be a lady?" asked young Tom.

Partridge was guilty of grinning behind his master's back, for the large white card asked the simple, direct question—"Do you want a really good shave?"

"Tom—and Partridge," said Mr. Gambol, who had caught sight of the grin as it faded away, "no real lady would dream of reading those words. Have the goodness to place the card on the wall and let me judge for myself."

The rebuked Partridge obeyed, and Mr. Gambol went outside the shop, closed the door, and then re-entered to try the effect. As he did so Pearl Henning appeared upon the scene, returning from a walk in Kensington Gardens with Felix Christie.

"Ah, Miss Margrit!" exclaimed her host. "Where have you been gadding?"

"Only in the Gardens," answered the girl.

"All by yourself?"

"Yes, of course, quite by myself," said Pearl, emphatically.

"What do you think of the new arrangements, Miss Margrit? I put on my considering cap this morning and you see the result."

"But I don't want a really good shave, Mr. Gambol," said Pearl, not knowing that a real lady would have ignored the invitation.

"I presume you mean to imply that the card had better be returned to its original position in our shaving-saloon?" said Mr. Gambol.

"Certainly, it's entirely out of place here," said Pearl, perceiving that she ought to be serious.

"Take it down, Partridge, take it down!" said her host, waving his hand. "I never approved of its removal, but you and Tom were so obstinate."

"Well, I like that!" cried Tom, indignantly. "A jolly lot me and Partridge had to do with it! It's jolly fine to lay it on to us! We never touched the old thing till you told us——"

"That'll do, Tom, that'll do!" interrupted Mr. Gambol, raising his bland voice. "I won't be answered back. You know that. Hold the steps for Partridge, and also hold your tongue."

Tom contented himself by muttering that he'd be jolly glad if old Partridge fell off the steps and broke his jolly neck, while the young barber, aware of Miss Henning's eyes, barely escaped such an accident in his desire to acquit himself with distinction.

"Careful, Partridge, careful!" said his master. "We must clip your wings, Partridge, if you fly off the top of the steps like that."

Pearl laughed and waited, leaning back against the counter, until the young barber, Tom, the steps, and the card had disappeared into the shaving-saloon.

She looked approvingly at Mr. Gambol in his frock-coat and broad white shirt-cuffs, with gold links. He always wore very shiny boots that creaked as he walked, a handsome gold watch and chain, and a diamond horseshoe scarf-pin. How she wished her young lover could have afforded to dress like that!

Mr. Gambol was not wholly dependent on his business, she knew, but even his sister was not in his confidence, and Pearl had hitherto failed to obtain, by her most ingenuous hints, any information on the subject from Mr. Gambol himself. She was always curious to know other people's incomes, ages, and private affairs.

"Why do you call me Margaret when everybody else calls me Pearl?" she asked suddenly, as her host went behind the counter, speaking to him over her shoulder.

" I object to nicknames on principle," he replied.

" But Pearl isn't exactly a nickname, is it ? It's rather a pretty name—Pearl—don't you think so ? Some people say it suits me."

" So does Margrit, and I consider Margrit even prettier," said Mr. Gambol ; adding, after a pause, with heavy gallantry, " Have I succeeded in making you blush, or is it the warmth of the afternoon ? "

Pearl, who had not blushed, looked at him archly over her shoulder.

" Do you really mean it ? " she said, referring to the compliment, and opening her wide eyes a little wider.

" Yes, I have observed a steady rise in the temperature since dinner," he answered, referring to the weather, and beginning to set a little tray of fancy combs in order.

Pearl had to read a long list of prices for Bath Salts, Toilet Powder, Vanishing Cream, Plaits and Fringes before she could trust herself to be patient with the man. The last words suggested her next speech.

" What would my pigtail fetch in the market, Mr. Gambol ? " she asked, childishly, holding up the beautiful rope of fair hair.

" My dear young lady, don't call it a ' pigtail ' ! " cried Mr. Gambol in a horrified tone. " Such a word should never be spoken in any reputable establishment of this description."

" Sorry ! " she murmured.

Mr. Gambol's momentary heat died away. He stealthily put out his hand and smoothed her plait, at first by the bow of ribbon at the end, and then higher up until his fingers touched her neck.

Pearl, who had feigned to be unconscious, instantly moved away. She turned her face and smiled at him a little reproachfully. Mr. Gambol smiled too.

" Do you wish me to make an offer for its purchase, Miss Margrit ? " he said, rubbing his hands and leaning over

the counter, as she had seen him do when chatting to commercial travellers.

"That depends on what you'll give," she replied, carefully arranging the ribbon, her favourite trick, with the plait over her shoulder.

"No, it depends on how much you want," said Mr. Gambol.

Her lips twitched with suppressed laughter. Mr. Gambol trying to flirt was rather like a hippopotamus trying to waltz.

"I think the gentleman usually makes the offer!" she said, saucily.

"But it's the lady who must name the price."

He bent a little farther over the counter and dropped his voice.

"I'd give something handsome, Miss Margrit, to handle —that's one of our business terms—your pretty hair."

Pearl returned his gaze long and thoughtfully.

Felix Christie, oddly enough, had been talking about her pretty hair that very afternoon. He had lifted the plait in one hand and gently put it to his lips, and now she was comparing that light caress with the touch of Mr. Gambol's thick, clinging fingers.

"I don't think I want to sell my "—she almost said pigtail—"sunny locks, after all, Mr. Gambol."

"Well, you can consider the offer open if ever you change your mind, Miss Margrit," he replied.

She laughed and nodded, kissed the tips of her fingers to him playfully, and went out of the shop into the house.

Mr. Gambol, with a pleasant sense of having distinguished himself in repartee, looked at his reflection in one of the highly polished mirrors hanging on the wall.

He brushed a speck of dust off the lapel of his frock-coat, expanded his chest, and smiled complacently at the very good-looking man—the man of forty—whom he saw in his imagination in the glass.

Pearl went upstairs to the room she shared with the twins.

She found it empty and sat down by the window, still in her hat and jacket, to think over the situation, first taking a box of chocolates out of her drawer and eating them slowly as she stared down into the street.

She did not love Felix Christie. If Christie had not fallen in love with her she would not have given him a second thought. If Mr. Gambol had not shown her a side of his character little suspected by his sister and friends she would have treated him with supreme indifference. If Professor Wiggins had not fallen another victim to her charms she would have ignored his existence.

But as it was she had deliberately laid her plans. Of course, Professor Wiggins was " impossible." He was too old, too ugly, and too poor, but it amused her to make a fool of him. Mr. Gambol was still uncertain, quite uncertain, but she was beginning to experience the excitement of daring capture, like an angler playing a very difficult, heavy fish.

Felix Christie had not fulfilled her expectations. She had mistaken him for a meek man. Now she was conscious of a strength of character that threatened to master her own ; he had won her secret and solemn promise to marry him ; his influence over her was greater than she would confess, but his courtship, young and extravagant as it was, awakened a feeling of strange gratitude in the shallow heart of the girl. She saw, in the bright light of his love—in every word, every deed—her own value in his eyes.

" If I wait for Chris—if I marry him——" Pearl said to herself, and left the sentence unfinished, resting her cheek on her hand, with her eyes half closed and her usually smooth forehead drawn into hard lines.

She had no faith in his genius. It was true that great books were written by men and women who made their fortunes out of fiction ; Pearl thought of her favourite lady

novelist; but it seemed impossible and ridiculous that Felix Christie should ever be numbered among them.

She knew him too well—they all knew him and understood him—he looked like any ordinary human being! Pearl imagined that an author with any prospect of making money out of his books would be more striking and eccentric in appearance.

One ought to be able to distinguish a coming author—but Chris! Chris might have been a clerk, or an artist, or a hairdresser—no, not a hairdresser. His own hair was too untidy. She wished, for the second time that afternoon, he possessed Mr. Gambol's fine appreciation of black cloth and stiff white collars.

"If I marry Chris——" she said again, and was silent for a long time.

Then she exclaimed, with sudden decision, "Of course I'll marry Chris!"

She felt as if the spoken words had acted like a charm, banishing her doubts and giving her confidence in her absent lover.

The idea of marriage being more than a hope of the future had only become possible during the past few weeks. Christie had been offered, and accepted, a position at Buckley's.

That enterprising firm had recently decided to start a new weekly paper, called "The Question," with the ostensible object of offering the public a solution for every social problem that occurred to an experienced editor.

It was to be written in a confidential, but slightly bullying style, calculated to provoke correspondence; there were to be a couple of good short stories, interviews with celebrities, and plentiful "fill-ups" in the form of couplets, and paragraphs about Royalty, actors and actresses. There would be, it is needless to add, more advertisement than matter, and the price was named at a penny weekly.

Mr. Ferguson, having chosen the experienced editor, offered Felix Christie the position of principal questioner.

That is to say, he was to work under orders, writing on any subject suggested, interviewing people with grievances adjudged of sufficient interest to go into print, looking into public abuses, and endeavouring, with all the power of his pen, to induce well-known men and women to endorse or contradict statements in the paper.

" Never mind what they think about us. All we want is to make them write ! " said Mr. Ferguson to his editor.

The motive of " The Question," as printed on its first page, was " To redress, to awaken, to inspire ! " It strongly appealed to Christie and he gratefully accepted Mr. Ferguson's offer, to Pearl's entire satisfaction.

He began to feel that he had been unjust to Buckley's, and determined, but not without a pang, to abandon his idea of writing a novel and devote himself entirely to the great and good work of " The Question."

" Hammersmith Society," always a weakling, had given its last gasp. The proprietor and Christie commemorated the event at a favourite restaurant in Soho, where the former grew sentimental and the latter hilarious over the cheap, light wine, and agreed to write, each from his own standpoint, the history of the rise and fall of the little paper.

The proprietor had forgotten all about the agreement on the following morning, but Christie's history, written in five chapters of about fifty words each, was the first of his many contributions to the pages of " Punch," reproduced afterwards in his book of sketches, " London Dawns."

Christie was no longer annoyed by the lack of money, for he could earn as a free-lance all that he needed for himself, but the idea of earning all that he needed to marry Pearl was a very different matter.

He had serious thoughts of returning to the Mus Doc's house in Waterloo Road, taking up his abode in Milliđew's top floor front, his own old room being now occupied by Professor Wiggins.

Ettie Boscombe approved of the scheme—she liked to think of him under the same roof as herself, even if they

never met—but Millidew, whom he generally consulted from old habit, opposed it with characteristic vehemence.

"Hang it all, Chris, you're not a beggar any longer," he said. "You have lived on the tiles long enough. You're not a street fiddler now, you know, but a literary man. You've got a future, my boy, and don't you forget it."

"Perhaps; but I've got a present too, and I must live somewhere, Ned," said Christie.

"Come and live with me!" exclaimed Millidew. "I've been thinking about it for months"—the idea had that instant flashed into his brain. "Look here, Chris! I'll get a place to suit us both. Why not? You leave it to me, Chris!"

"Are you serious?"

"Downright! I want some sort of a place to show my cartoons. They're just the sort of things to sell out of a shop-window. Lord! I can do 'em by the dozen, hot and steaming up-to-date. We should get on like a house afire, you and I. What do you say, Chris? Shall we do it?"

"It must be cheap," urged Christie.

"That's all right. I know places—dozens of places—dirt cheap. You leave everything to me!"

"Do as you like, Ned," answered Christie.

The artist had been his first friend in London, always trusted and held dear.

Christie spent much of his time at Buckley's, even before the appearance of "The Question," but had few opportunities of cultivating the friendship of Houghton Buckley. The head of the firm, instead of returning to England at the conclusion of his business in Berlin, had been joined by Mrs. Buckley and his younger son for a long-projected tour of the Rhine.

"Mr. Buckley approves of 'The Question,'" said Mr. Ferguson, "though he hasn't gone into its programme in detail. He has given it, as it were, the royal sanction."

Houghton congratulated Christie warmly on his appointment.

"You're just the man we want!" he said—his favourite phrase. "My father himself might have picked you out, and that's saying a great deal. Do you know the secret of my father's success?"

"I should think there are many secrets," replied Christie.

"No!" said Houghton. "There's only one. He's a ripping good judge of men. Look at old Ferguson! A round peg in a round hole. Look at all our fellows! Exactly suited to Buckley's. Birds of a feather flock together, that's our saw, and you're the latest modern instance."

"You forget that Mr. Buckley has never seen me," said his companion. "I am not his choice at all. His opinion of me and my suitability might be very different from yours or Mr. Ferguson's."

"By Jove, that's true!" exclaimed Houghton. "I wonder what you'll think of the chief, and what he'll think of you."

"I wonder!" said Christie.

CHAPTER XV

THE WORKSHOP IN DRURY LANE

THE world moved quickly with Felix Christie from the day that he joined Buckley's.

It was he who suggested the poster that puzzled London for a couple of weeks, being the preliminary advertisement of the new paper. A red note of interrogation on a white ground suddenly appeared on the hoardings, striking in its obvious simplicity. Mr. Ferguson had received instructions to boom "The Question" from Mr. Buckley, who approved of his choice of an editor, but was not informed of the appointment of Christie.

He took little notice of the small men in his employ, unless he happened to meet them personally, when his interest and courtesy made amends for neglect.

"Buckley is all right when you can get at him," was a remark frequently heard at the office.

"Of course he's all right!" Mr. Ferguson would loyally rejoin, when it happened to catch his ear. "Isn't he in the front rank of his profession? Isn't he the head of us all?"

"As Othello says, the head and front of our offending," observed Christie.

The pang which Christie had felt in relinquishing the idea of writing a novel was repeated again and again, to his own surprise, even while his enthusiasm over "The Question" grew greater every day.

Disjointed incidents of the story weaved themselves, against his will, into a definite plot; the characters developed of their own accord; he caught himself planning the arrangement of chapters, discarding, selecting, and elaborating different parts of the book in his brain.

For a time he struggled against his fancy, concentrating all his mental energy on the series of articles which were to be published in the first six issues of " the Question," but the effort was too great, and he allowed himself, as a luxury, to think over the novel during his long morning walks, for he still rose at dawn to tramp the streets.

Pearl took no interest in " The Question " except to grumble about his salary. She generally called him " John Tompkins, the hedger and ditcher, who, though he was poor, didn't wish to be richer," and contrived, not always intentionally, to make him very wretched.

As much bewitched as if she had literally cast a spell over him, he saw how utterly unsuited they were to each other, but would not have freed himself—even if it had been in his power—from the thraldom of her beauty. Such a passion, in a man of a lower type, would have swept everything before it like a devouring flame, but his self-control and chivalry protected them both.

He would not drag Pearl into a hasty marriage of poverty, for he knew that she was not the woman to help him, and that their only chance of lasting happiness depended on the gratification of her desires. It was the truth, and he accepted it. She loved ease and she loved money. He must give her both.

They generally met in Kensington Gardens, or at Ettie Boscombe's rooms in Waterloo Road.

Ettie's life had been shadowed for several months by a new development in her mother's peculiar illness. The patient's appetite was as good as ever, she slept as soundly and read as many novels, but declined to leave her bed. This most dangerous of all symptoms in her malady had first shown itself on a particularly cold winter day.

" I don't think I'll get up to-day, Ettie dear," she said after breakfast. " You'd better tell Mrs. Poole to look after my fire while you're out at work."

Ettie was not alarmed, but when her mother refused to rise on the next day and the next, pleading terrible lassi-

tude, but angrily rejecting the idea of a doctor, she braced herself for a struggle, determined to save her beloved mother from the weary life of a confirmed invalid.

Her persuasions, arguments, and entreaties were all in vain. Mrs. Boscombe listened sweetly and patiently, but only shook her head and sighed in answer.

Poor Mrs. Poole took a gloomy satisfaction in the increased feebleness of her lodger, spending all the time she could spare in her room, during Ettie's absence, discussing the probability of the entire loss of the use of her lower limbs, pitying, flattering, and asking questions.

Gradually one by one the ornaments and little comforts of the sitting-room were transferred to Mrs. Boscombe's bedroom, and her daughter noticed that she was adapting herself to the new life by asking for different food, more tempting and expensive, but of which she ate very sparingly.

Ettie's work was considerably increased, but it was not on that account that she deplored her mother's helplessness. She had no alternative but to accept the situation, confessing herself beaten by the determined, quiet obstinacy that she called in her affection the weakness of her dear one.

Mrs. Boscombe could never make up her mind whether she liked or disliked Felix Christie. He was very good-tempered and entertained her with interesting little items of news—she only read police reports, cooking recipes, and divorce cases in the paper—but he had a way of looking at her curiously and critically. It was very disquieting and made her feel irritable.

She detested Edward Millidew, suspecting him, without any reason, of the crime of drawing her in caricature.

Pearl, who made a point of sympathizing with the poor lady to her face even if she laughed behind her back, was rather a favourite, and she regarded Professor Wiggins, who called her "that poor, dear martyr," with great friendliness.

Ettie was the only person who knew the story of Christie's novel, for he always found it easy to talk to her. Pearl, to do her justice, was never jealous of his affection for her friend,

Edward Millidew, possessed with the idea of sharing rooms with Christie, did not let the grass grow beneath his restless feet.

For a week he started out every day in the highest spirits, in quest of a suitable abode, but returned at night in the depths of depression.

Ettie implored him not to take his disappointments so much to heart, and Christie treated the whole matter as a joke. Millidew always went to extremes. In his own words, suggestive of Mr. Micawber, he was either "dancing like a butterfly in the sunshine, or dragging his weary feet through the clods of the valley of despair."

On the eighth day of his quest he arrived, at midday, at Buckley's in the City, and asked for Christie.

Christie went down to see him in one of the waiting-rooms. Millidew immediately jumped on the table and executed a step-dance, scattering the Buckley publications on to the floor, and frightening an elderly gentleman and a lady journalist, the only other occupants of the room, almost out of their wits.

"Found, Chris; found! The search is over! I've reached the South Pole! Behold me, crowned with success!" he shouted.

"Come down!" exclaimed Christie. "Have you gone mad?"

"Yes, mad with joy! Drunk with delight!" and he bounded down from the table as nimbly as he had bounded up.

"What's the matter, Ned?" asked his friend.

"Drury Lane, my boy; Drury Lane!" said Millidew, seating himself in an arm-chair and dropping his voice, to the evident relief of the elderly gentleman and the young lady.

"Well, what about Drury Lane?" demanded Christie.

"I've taken a house, Chris—glorious little place! Just the thing for us. Dirt cheap. Come and see it!"

"You've taken a house?" repeated the other in astonishment. "In Drury Lane, Ned? You don't mean it?"

"I swear I do. Dirt cheap! I won't tell you the rent

till we get there. Come on, old boy! Come on! Come on!"

"I must speak to Mr. Ferguson. Wait for me, Ned," answered Christie, fired to action by his friend's excitement.

He ran upstairs, leaving Millidew alone with the elderly gentleman, the young lady having made her escape.

When he returned the artist was calmly reading the paper, and the elderly gentleman had retired into the passage, where he was pacing backwards and forwards in a highly nervous manner.

"What did you do to the old gentleman while I was away?" asked Christie, as the two young men left the building.

"Nothing at all," said Millidew. "I only told him I was sure we had met before. He said he didn't remember my face. 'Oh, yes, you do,' said I, shaking him warmly by the hand. 'You and I fought against the Greeks together at Thermopylæ!' 'God bless my soul!' said the old boy, and he bolted into the passage."

"You're mad," laughed Christie. "Tell me about Drury Lane."

"It's one of those quaint little holes, Chris, that are bound to disappear sooner or later from London streets."

"Swept away by the tide of bricks and mortar," said Christie.

"You're right," said Millidew. "There are only five rooms and a sort of scullery at the back. Just the right size for you and me. The last man who had it was a barber, but of course he's carried off all his rubbish along with him."

Christie wondered what Pearl's friend, Mr. Gambol, would think of a man who could mention the word "rubbish" in connexion with tonsorial art.

"Is the place in good repair?" asked Christie.

"Not quite," said Millidew. "But we could get it into shape in no time."

"Is there gas laid on and plenty of water?"

"My dear man, we're not in the backwoods of your

native land ! " exclaimed the artist. " Of course there's gas. You'll smell it directly you get inside, and there's lots of water, because the tap of the scullery won't turn off."

" Sounds promising ! " observed Christie.

" Oh, if you're going to be nasty over a tiny leakage in a gas-pipe and a little trickle of water——"

" That's all right, Ned ! I'm not easily daunted."

The house in Drury Lane—that has long since disappeared, as Millidew foretold—was very small, dark, and uncomfortable.

The front room, formerly a barber's parlour, had a low ceiling, wide windows suitable for a shop-front, and wainscoted walls. A narrow passage ended in the kitchen, or scullery, with an outlook on to a blind wall. A steep flight of stairs led the way to two upper rooms, the attic being reached by a fixed wooden ladder.

It was a lopsided little house, all the floors and ceilings sloping from east to west as if it had grown weary, as Christie said, of standing in Drury Lane and was resting on one foot.

The bedrooms, like the sitting-room, were wainscoted; there was a large cupboard in each, and wide black mantelpieces of carved wood over mean little fire-places.

" The premises are very well suited for any kind of business," said the agent's clerk, a sharp youth in his middle teens. " You're within a stone's-throw of the pit and gallery entrances of Drury Lane Theatre, and there are public-houses almost next door to you on both sides."

" Mr. Millidew is an artist," said Christie, gravely. " Do you think the close proximity of the two public-houses will be good for his style of business ? "

The sharp boy meditated, rubbing the doorkey up and down his nose.

" I should think the premises admirably suited to an artist, sir," he said, with decision. " You see you can't get dull in 'em. There's always something to divert your mind. Artists naturally get dull and low-spirited."

"Do they? How do you account for that?" asked Christie.

"It's sedentary, sir, and I suppose it doesn't agree with them," said the observant boy, as if "sedentary" were something to eat.

"I'm a writer, but I play the violin in my odd time," said Christie, who liked the sharp boy. "Do you think the neighbours will object?"

"Oh no, sir!" he answered, with a grin. "The walls of the premises are very thick and this is not a quiet neighbourhood. There's lots of life in the Lane, especially of a Saturday night."

"Fights?" said Millidew.

"Well, sir, there are occasional disagreements, I believe," admitted the youth. "But you needn't be alarmed on that account, there being good oak shutters to all the windows and a stout front door."

"I see the last tenant left his sign behind him, Chris," said Millidew, stepping again into the street to view "the premises" from the kerb, and observing an ancient barber's pole fixed at one side of the door, like a giant sugar-stick with the colour sucked off.

"It can easily be removed, sir," said the agent's boy.

"No, no, we'll let it remain," said Christie. "It is a record of the past, adding historic interest to the building."

"Just as you please, sir," said the boy, indulgently. "We've all got our little fancies."

"What do you say, Chris?" said Millidew in a low voice, thrusting his arm through his friend's. "Do you like the little hutch? Will it do for us both? I must have the bedroom in front because of the light. Can you put up with the back one?"

"Of course I can, Ned."

"Then you're satisfied? You'll think it over? I'm sure we can pay our way. Don't look so infernally serious, Chris! Shall we go to see the agent this afternoon? When will you make up your mind?"

"I've made it up already," answered Christie. "We'll take it, Ned."

" Good man ! " exclaimed Millidew, slapping him on the back. " We'll step round to your place at once, my boy, and have a chat with your master."

" Our head will be very pleased to see you, sir," said the boy, with a slight emphasis on the word, as a correction to master ; and he added as he locked the door and put the key in his pocket, " They're beautiful premises for any gentlemen who wish to settle down in this part of London."

" Are you settled down in this part of London yourself ?" asked Christie, as they started for the agent's office.

" No, sir," said the boy. " I don't care to be quite so central. I prefer a more residential part of town."

" Then I suppose you live in the West End ? " said Christie.

" More in that direction, sir," replied the boy. " I am residing at present in Camden Town. This is our office, gentlemen. Will you kindly walk in ? "

A long interview with the agent followed, in the course of which Millidew declared several times that he would have nothing more to do with the business—he didn't come there to be instructed—he had rented scores of houses in his time—and so on. Finally the settlement was left to Christie, who agreed to take the house, if the terms were approved by the landlord, on a three years' lease.

The agent, given the name of Mr. Alexander Ferguson, of Buckley's, as a reference, lauded the little house after the manner of his youthful assistant, assuring Mr. Christie that he would find Drury Lane one of the pleasantest streets in the whole of London.

Christie listened attentively, giving the agent the impression of being a very polite, rather simple young man —and made thirty shillings out of the interview on the following day by writing a sketch, called " The Premises," for an evening paper.

The landlord approving of the terms agreed upon by the agent, in less than a fortnight the two friends took possession of the lopsided little house. It had been thoroughly cleaned under the supervision of Ettie Boscombe and Miss

Gambol, the former merciful, the latter a slave-driver with charwomen, and the young men whitewashed and painted it themselves.

They had very little furniture, but on the first night of their occupation, sitting in the little room on the ground floor, both Millidew and Christie were filled with pride and satisfaction.

Millidew talked incessantly, suggesting extensive improvements and extravagant schemes for decoration.

The first number of " The Question " was to appear the following week. Christie had seen no part of it, except the cover and his own article, and his hopes were high. He had made up his mind to begin his novel, writing at night and in the early morning.

Pearl had been adorable at their last meeting. Her fair face floated before him, in imagination, in its aura of pale hair.

He rose, after a while, and took out his violin, long since redeemed from the pawnshop in Waterloo Road, tuned, and began to play. His arm, unless he attempted quick bowing for any length of time, did not trouble him.

He no longer played with the ease of hard practice, but with more expression and feeling than in the old days. Martelli, the great violinist, told him so.

" You were formerly like a man reading a language he did not understand fluently and well," he said. " But now, though you only speak a few words haltingly and ill, they are full of meaning and express your thoughts."

Millidew listened patiently, but only waited for his friend to lay aside his bow to continue talking. Directly the music stopped he burst out again, the more eager and extravagant from restraint.

Christie smiled at him affectionately and put away the violin.

It was impossible to make music in the same room as Edward Millidew, but it was not impossible to dream of his love and think of his book.

CHAPTER XVI

LIFE IN DRURY LANE

MISS PEARL HENNING made her way hastily along Drury Lane.

Her walk always reminded Christie of a pigeon, for she had a trick of jerking her head and picking up her feet, as if the earth were not quite good enough to step upon.

There was a good reason for daintiness on this occasion, for it had been drizzling all day, so that the road and pavement were flecked with little pools of water and slippery with mud.

It was seven o'clock on a cold autumn night. The streets were all rain-soaked and brown, dirty and dreary.

Pearl, who always behaved as if her friends were responsible for bad weather, was very angry with Christie for having made her promise to pay him a visit on this particular evening.

She would greatly have preferred the Gambols' comfortable sitting-room, where she could have sat with her feet on the fender, reading a novelette, from after tea till bedtime.

She held her skirt drawn up on one side, grasping in the other hand an umbrella, a fancy handbag, and a copy of the current issue of " The Question."

On reaching the door of the two friends' little house—Millidew and Christie had been in possession for about six months—she rapped smartly with the silver knob of her umbrella, too impatient to use the big metal ring that took the place of an ordinary knocker.

The shop was still open, for Millidew found that many

of his best customers only appeared upon the scene late at night.

The majority of his original drawings were displayed on brown-paper mats, but some of them were framed, all being ticketed with their prices, ranging from half-a-crown to three guineas. Printed copies, coloured by hand, were sold at a shilling, and uncoloured at sixpence apiece.

In one corner of the window was a small pile of Christie's unpretentious book, "London Dawns," published by Buckley's, cheaply bound and cheaply printed, with a frontispiece drawn by Millidew, so unlike his usual work that few people would have believed it could possibly be by the same hand as the cartoons.

Christie often thought, in later years, that all Millidew's faults would be forgiven for the sake of that one beautiful and simple drawing.

The door flew open at Pearl's aggressive rap, and Christie seized her out of the rain and gathering darkness.

"Angel!" he exclaimed. "Come in! Ned's not at home. How sweet of you to get here so early."

The little room, with its low ceiling, looked very quaint, warm, and hospitable.

The young men had arranged it after their own fashion. They had stained the floor, and hung the walls with the oddest collection of drawings, prints, and Japanese scrolls of vivid colouring.

Christie's books were piled on shelves from wainscot to ceiling. A small hired piano was squeezed into one corner, as if it were trying to hide behind the door. Millidew's work-table, where the friends spent all their odd minutes in colouring the printed cartoons, served on festive occasions either as a dumb-waiter or an extra seat.

The chairs were limited, but there were several big hassocks and an oak pew that Millidew had picked up as a great bargain, regardless of the fact that it was much too big and cumbersome for the lopsided little house. Christie was not in a position to complain. He also had made an

addition to the household that his friend declared was equally gigantic, in the shape of a Newfoundland dog, Nebuchadnezzar, with the most curly coat and faithful, devoted eyes that his master had ever seen ; a dog to be proud of, to love and be loved all the years of his doggy life.

Neb joined in the welcome to Pearl, but she pushed him away with little squeals of annoyance.

" Don't let him jump all over me, Chris ! " she cried. " Don't let him put his great paws on my new coat ! "

Christie ordered Neb into his corner, and relieved his sweetheart of her burdens. Then he held out his arms, but Pearl was too ruffled in temper to respond to the invitation.

" What a beastly place Drury Lane is ! " she exclaimed. " I don't know how you can endure it. All the children are dirty and all the men and women are drunk."

" Not all, dearest ! " protested Christie. " You don't mean to include Ned and me, do you ? "

" Oh, you ! " she answered, contemptuously. " You're an honest John Tompkins. How do you like my new things ? I never knew such a man ! A girl might as well be dressed in sacking for all the notice you take of it."

" I haven't had time, Pearl——"

" Time ! " interrupted Pearl, who usually added emphasis to her remarks by repetition. " Time ! Good gracious me ! You've had time to talk to the dog and jabber about Drury Lane. I should like to know what you mean by time. Time, indeed ! "

" Well, let me look at you," said Christie, taking her by the arms and pushing her into a good light. " It's true I never think about your clothes, Pearl, for I can't think of anything but your lovely eyes and your lovely hair."

" That's all very well," she answered, mollified. " But try to be sensible for once. How do you think I look ? "

If Christie had known more of girls he would not have taken her, or any other woman, quite at her word on the subject of personal criticism.

But he perched himself on the back of the old pew,

folded his arms, and looked at her steadily from head to foot. He had never looked at her quite in the same way before, coolly and seriously, for she had dashed the ardour of his greeting with her pettish words and frowns.

Her new coat and skirt were green, trimmed with buttons the size of halfpenny pieces—Christie counted sixpenny-worth on the coat, three pennyworth on each cuff, more than a shillingsworth on the skirt—and she wore a fur stole, a lace cravat, and a big green felt hat, its lacerated sides stabbed with amber hatpins.

The hat was heavy with feathers. There were no less than twelve little furry heads, wonderfully life-like with their shining bead eyes, peeping out of different parts of the stole, with any number of tails or legs, only the furrier knew for which they were intended, dangling from the ends and over the shoulders.

" Well ? " she said, after revolving slowly for her lover's inspection.

Christie suddenly turned his eyes away. A peculiar thought had flashed into his mind, instantly taking form in a mental picture.

He saw her hung with the little soft dead animals the furry heads were meant to represent, while the plumes shading her face changed into a slaughtered bird—so beautiful in life, an embodied joy—with torn wings and a stained breast.

The picture was gone as quickly as it came, but it filled him with a subtle, momentary repugnance to the woman whose appearance had caused it.

" Well ? " said Pearl again, still revolving with her hands on her hips and admiring eyes cast down on the well-cut skirt of her dress.

" Well," he repeated slowly, " I think the colour is too dull—muddy—indefinite—it has no richness in the folds."

" What nonsense you talk ! " she exclaimed. " I sincerely hope there aren't any folds. What else ? "

" That's an appalling heel, Pearl," he went on, catching

a glimpse of one shoe as she pivoted. He thought it wiser not to give his opinion of the fur stole or feathered hat.

"What's the matter with the heel?" asked the young lady, putting her foot up on a chair. "It's a 'Louie Quorts.'"

Christie suddenly laughed, she did not know why, and caught her into his arms.

"You darling!" he cried.

"What a strange fellow you are, John Tompkins," she said, pressing her fair cheek against his. "One minute you're as black as thunder and the next you're on the broad grin. Now let me go, Chris! I've got my hair done in a new way and I want to show you. Do let me go!"

She allowed him to pull the amber hatpins out of her hat, but removed it herself in front of the old circular mirror hanging over Millidew's work-table. Her hair no longer hung in a plait, but was most elaborately curled and waved and puffed.

"Glorious!" exclaimed Christie. "You look like a great lady of olden days going to a feast; but I think it is just as beautiful in a single knot, or better still, hanging loose on your shoulders. Then it reminds me of corn in the sun."

"It really might be a wig, mightn't it?" said Pearl, with supreme satisfaction, curving her white throat from side to side before the mirror. "Nobody would think it was all my own, but it is!"

"Did you arrange it yourself?" he asked, watching the pretty, vain creature with mingled admiration and amusement.

"Not quite," she answered after a pause. "In fact, Mr. Gambol helped me. I'm not skilful enough to do it so neatly. It's not so easy to master the hairdressing as you'd imagine. It's not like writing books."

Christie knew that Pearl was learning Mr. Gambol's business, with the approval of her parents, but it had not occurred to him she would be instructed in such a way.

Surprise and indignation swept over him. He could not endure the thought of the hairdresser's big, flapper hands touching those soft waves.

"Dearest!" he burst out, "I wish you wouldn't let Gambol play about with your hair. I'm sure you might do without his assistance."

Pearl flushed, opened her lips for an angry retort, but checked the words and was silent for a few seconds before replying.

"Mr. Gambol doesn't 'play about' with my hair. Do you think it is wrong to have it properly waved and arranged?"

"I think it is unnecessary in your case to let old Gambol——"

"You needn't be rude to my friends. Old Gambol, indeed! You would make a fine fuss if he—if he——" she could not think of anything bitter to say, so ended the sentence rather tamely; "There would be a fine fuss if he was to call you young Christie!"

"I don't care a hang what he calls me," said Christie. "But I didn't mean to offend you, Pearl. I only wanted to say——"

"You only wanted to say that I oughtn't to have my own hair nicely done because I'm learning the business!" she interrupted in a burst.

"My dear girl!" protested Christie. "It was nothing of the kind. We were speaking of Gambol."

"I don't want to speak of Gambol," she answered, with a stamp of her foot.

"Very well," said Christie; "neither do I. He's not an interesting subject, but I hate the idea of the man touching your hair. I can't help it, Pearl."

"You touch it yourself," she said.

"Yes, but in what spirit——"

He did not end the sentence, but lifted her hand to his lips and held it there in silence.

"Oh, that will do!" exclaimed the girl, pulling her

hand away. "Now tell me what you have been doing with yourself. I've got this week's 'Question,' you see."

His face clouded. They sat down side by side, her cheek leaning against his shoulder, in the old pew. Neb crept out and stretched himself at his master's feet.

"I dislike 'The Question' more and more," said Christie.

"Why?" raising her face for a moment, then returning to the old position. "I think it's very interesting, Chris. I like those articles about the stage."

"Do you? Such ancient scandals, my dearest."

"Well, I think the General Information Page is most instructive," said Pearl hastily.

Christie laughed and drew her closer.

"They tell you how many needles it would take, one on top of another, to reach to the top of the Monument, or how many books there are in the British Museum Reading Room, or how to make gunpowder, don't they, Pearl?"

"Well, it's very useful to know those sort of things, Chris."

"Is it, angel?"

"To be sure. I've heard you say that everybody ought to be well informed."

"I can't help making an obvious or dull remark occasionally. Don't bring it up against me, darling."

"Of course your own articles are the best things in the paper, Chris."

"Little flatterer!"

"No, I mean it, really. I should read them every week, even if I didn't know you, John Tompkins. I always look at them first, even before I turn to 'Modes of the Moment.' By the way, have you seen the new skirt in this week's? It's too ridiculous! I wouldn't walk down the street in such a thing. Talk about classic figures. I think they were hideous. You might as well be a broomstick for all the fit they want. My gracious!"

She caught up the paper and began to search for "Modes of the Moment," licking her thumb to turn over the pages.

Christie walked up and down the room, a habit of his when there was agitation in the air.

"I can't understand your approval of 'The Question'!" he burst out. "It's utterly different from what I hoped and expected. It's a failure, a dead failure."

"How can you say so?" asked Pearl, still searching for the design of the new skirt. "The circulation is going up by leaps and bounds. Look at the advertisements on the walls!"

"Hateful and ugly."

"Look at the enormous prizes they're offering for competitions."

"Inane and brainless."

Pearl stared at him.

"What's the matter with you? Don't they pay? Can't you get your salary? Is that why you've turned against them in this mad way?"

"Of course I get my salary," answered Christie impatiently.

"Then what are you grumbling about? Don't tell me that you're going to give up working for Buckley's, Chris! It would be too stupid for words."

He knelt down in front of the old pew and laid his clasped hands on her knees, looking at her imploringly.

"Dearest, I want to give it up. I believed that 'The Question' would give me just the opportunity I needed, but it's a wretched disappointment. It takes all my time, for Ferguson is so exacting. It's a perpetual grind."

"You'll get used to it in time," she interrupted.

"That's just what I dread, Pearl! I don't want to get used to it. I want to break away while I can, and be free again."

"You're so unsettled. You never stick to anything," said the girl.

"But I'm making very little money at Buckley's, after all," he urged.

"You could make more if you chose. Why don't you

write long serial stories? I'm sure you've got heaps of ideas. Why don't you make Mr. Ferguson give you more to do in 'The Question'? You could arrange the General Information Page we were talking about just as well as the man who does it now. Of course, nobody would expect you to write about fashions or cooking recipes, for you haven't had the education or training; but you might do the politics, or that serious bit on the front page every week. You ought to push yourself forward. A man's got to blow his own trumpet nowadays if he wants to make money, and I suppose you do want to make money—don't you?—for my sake?"

"Yes."

"Then stick to Buckley's, Chris. Elbow your way to the front. It isn't the dreamy man who succeeds, or the literary man, or the most refined—it's the man who can shove. You can laugh at me if you like, but I'm talking good common sense."

"So you are, Pearl! Go on, my dear."

It was true that he laughed at her, but her words showed him that the subject of his book, interesting him more and more every day, would never appeal to that good common sense she was so proud of possessing. He had meant to tell her about it, but changed his mind.

It was much wiser, and easier, to make love.

Edward Millidew returned home at eight o'clock, laden with provisions, it being the night of the week when guests were expected at the little shop in Drury Lane.

Christie thought that drinks, tobacco, and coffee were enough to offer, but his partner produced an odd selection of what he called "tempters," comprising two dressed crabs; a jar of preserved ginger; bananas; a box of Scotch shortbread, in honour of Mr. Ferguson, who frequently paid them a visit; a quantity of figs; dates; almonds, and a tinned pineapple.

Pearl was in her element helping the young men to spread out the feast and make the coffee. She liked

Millidew, often wishing that Christie was as amusing as his friend. There was a lively discussion over the opening of the pineapple tin and arranging the limited stock of crockery, but when it was done the talk flagged until the arrival of Ettie Boscombe.

Ettie looked prettier than usual, as Pearl perceived in an instant, and the young men after a little while. She had just returned from a holiday, and carried the flag of perfect health.

"How lucky we are, Chris!" cried Millidew. "Don't let us admit any of the other fellows to-night. Let us be misers, you and me, and keep our lovely ladies all to ourselves."

"You had better consult the wishes of the lovely ladies," said Pearl. "Do you approve of monopolies, Ettie?"

"Of course she does!" said Millidew, before Ettie could speak. "'Lift up your countenance,' Miss Boscombe, 'as it were the day of celebration of that nuptial we two have sworn shall come'!"

"But we haven't!" laughed Ettie.

"I don't know what he means," said Pearl.

"It was a quotation from Shakespeare, angel," said Christie.

"I don't care about Shakespeare," said Pearl, hastening to add, "But, of course, I've seen some of his plays acted. We make a point of going to the theatre at home when there's anything high-class, like Shakespeare, or 'The Sign of the Cross,' or 'The Royal Divorce.' I saw both of those when I was quite a small child, but I've never forgotten them. My mother says plays and books ought to teach you something."

"Does she include pictures, Miss Henning?" asked Millidew. "What do you think of these?"

He spread out his three latest drawings.

Pearl gave a shriek of laughter at the first, illustrating a coarse joke about an intoxicated woman; looked puzzled at the second, which was political; and exclaimed "How

sweet ! " at the third, failing to grasp the sarcasm behind the sketch of a couple of slum children killing butterflies in a daisy field.

Ettie said nothing, for Millidew's work always saddened her.

" Oh, Ned ! " said Christie, pointing to the first of the drawings. " I'm afraid that when many a villain has evolved into a ministering angel, you'll still lie howling—forgive me for another quotation, Pearl."

Millidew laughed good-naturedly.

" I warned you years ago that you'd made a bad friend, St. Christie of Canada."

The arrival of another visitor interrupted the conversation. It was Mr. Ferguson, whose severe treatment of Christie at their first meeting at Buckley's had changed into affectionate cordiality.

Mr. Ferguson, who frequently observed that he was not a society man, surprised Pearl by his unconventionality. Instead of talking about the weather, or any other subject suitable for a mixed company, he lighted his pipe, selected a comfortable chair, placed it in a corner, and sat down to read a book which he had brought along with him.

" I know you'll excuse me taking a part in any debate this evening," he said ; " but I'm rather anxious to look through this little volume, and I knew you'd like to have my company at your social gathering."

" You make yourself quite at home, Mr. Ferguson," answered Millidew.

" Thank you, I'll take you at your word," said the Scotchman, and he devoted himself to Dr. MacDougall on Gaelic Pulpit Orators.

" Good gracious me ! " whispered Pearl to Ettie Boscombe. " I never saw such cheek in all my born days ! "

Ettie only smiled and turned to Christie.

" I wanted to talk to you about ' The Question,' " she said, also in a low voice, glancing towards Mr. Ferguson in the corner. " But I suppose it is impossible now ? "

"Not at all," he replied. "Old Alick is absorbed in his book. He won't hear a word we say."

"Then I must confess that I'm more and more disappointed in the paper every week," said Ettie.

"I hoped you would say that!" he exclaimed. "I've been longing to hear your opinion. I can do nothing, absolutely nothing, to influence Cartwright, and it's no good appealing to head-quarters"—with a jerk of his head towards Mr. Ferguson. "Everything is left to Cartwright. He ignores the fact that I was to have my say in the make-up of the paper every week."

Cartwright was the editor of "The Question."

"What are you going to do about it? Resign?" asked Ettie.

"How quickly you come to the point. Snip-snap, like a pair of scissors!" exclaimed Christie. "That's what I like and admire in you, Ettie—at least, one of the numberless things I like and admire—you are so decisive. No, I am not going to resign. Pearl won't hear of it."

He looked at Pearl, who was laughing over some more of Millidew's cartoons on the other side of the room, a little ruefully.

"She thinks I should be an idiot to throw up a certainty," he went on. "And, of course, she is quite right from a practical standpoint. She reminds me a little of my mother, who is a New England woman, as you know, but swears by the old English policy of keeping one's feet under another man's table."

"She is naturally impressed with the importance of Buckley's," said Ettie, also looking at Pearl in her considerate way. "But I think you ought to settle this matter for yourself, Felix. You hoped so much from 'The Question'——"

"Very foolishly!" he interrupted. "I might have known that Buckley's and originality are the poles asunder. Popularity, public opinion, the majority right or wrong—those are the gods we worship at our temple in the City.

I can't imagine why Buckley's accept all my short stories. They've got into the habit, I suppose. There's no other way of accounting for it. Talking of Buckley's," he broke off as there was a loud knock at the door, " here is the Heir Apparent."

He threw open the door and greeted the new guest with great warmth.

Houghton Buckley, smiling, handsome, debonair, with the indescribable grace and ease of his youth and good breeding, presented a striking contrast to the three other men in the room, greatly to their disadvantage in Pearl Henning's eyes.

Ferguson looked gaunt, elderly, and uncouth beside him ; his frank expression and upright bearing seemed to draw attention to Edward Millidew's shifty eyes and rounded shoulders ; but the difference between young Buckley and Felix Christie was more interesting and difficult to define. Of about the same age and height, both equally cordial and anxious to please the other, both clean-shaven, both dark, lithe and muscular, it was only a pair of eyes much more keen and intuitive than Pearl's that would have suspected the limitations and lack of depth in the Englishman, and realized the possibilities and power of the Canadian.

" My dear boy, I am the herald of a distinguished guest ! " said Houghton to Christie, after an introduction to the girls. " Do you know with whom I have been dining ? "

" The King ? The Prime Minister ? Little Tich ? " suggested Millidew.

" Pargetter ! " said Houghton. " What do you say to that, Chris ? Yes, I've just left Mr. Pargetter at the Ritz. He's coming on to pay you a visit."

" I hope he'll be able to get in," said Christie, doubtfully. " Our space is so very limited."

" We must have an overflow meeting in the Lane," said Houghton. " I shall be happy to give up my chair. May I do so now ? Isn't this a good idea ? I rather like it."

He sat down cross-legged at Pearl's feet, looking up into her face with gay, admiring eyes.

"I don't think Chris approves, Mr. Buckley," said the girl.

"Then he can disapprove," said Houghton, coolly. "Do you think I am going back to that stool of repentance after sitting here? No, not for all the Christies in Christendom!"

"I don't believe you are very happy down there," said Pearl.

"Don't you?"

"No."

Houghton did not argue the point, but he continued looking into the pretty face bent down towards him with an expression of intense earnestness—as if he were looking at a girl for the first time in his life—and Pearl, to her own surprise, suddenly blushed and turned her eyes away.

Houghton smiled. He flirted, as he did everything else, without exerting himself, and rarely missed an opportunity to keep his hand in.

Long before Mr. Pargetter appeared upon the scene the room was crowded. Ettie talked well, always with sense, sometimes with humour; but Pearl would have found the evening very dull if it had not been for Houghton, although she was shrewd enough to perceive that even her charms did not wholly absorb his attention.

He occasionally forgot the game they were playing and joined in the general conversation, leaving her for minutes at a time with nothing to do or say.

She knew that a glance would have brought Christie to her side, but she hoped to make him jealous by neglect. There was a certain excitement in making any man jealous, especially a self-controlled man like her lover.

All her previous ideas about evening parties were overturned. It was the first time she had been present at one of the gatherings in Drury Lane, and Christie had not prepared her for its informality.

The guests were nearly all friends of Millidew's. There

were two novelists. One of them was short and pale, haggardly thin, and with a gloomy brow ; the other was heavily built, with a shock of untidy, straw-coloured hair, and a cheerful, pouting face like a cherub blowing a trumpet. Appearances in the case of these young men were deceptive, the black-browed one being lively and witty, and his friend of a pessimistic, melancholy disposition.

A third man, who looked so very youthful that Pearl considered him a cub of a boy, talked exclusively to the middle-aged lady who accompanied him, supplying her with endless cigarettes, so that they were lost to the rest of the company in a mist of smoke.

There was an artist who sang music-hall songs in a refined, mournful voice ; a Conservative engineer who argued hotly with a Socialistic clerk, as if they were in Hyde Park instead of a friend's house. There were several journalists whose whole talk was journalistic, and three girls from Buckley's who astounded Pearl by their discussion of social problems with the men.

The room was crowded when Mr. Pargetter arrived, several of the visitors being obliged to sit on the stairs.

From the minute of his entrance the whole atmosphere changed. His great, cordial voice, his friendly smile, and his air of good-fellowship made him at home on the instant. All petty and mean thoughts were swept away by his simple beneficence and faith in humanity, while his absolute self-confidence and honest pleasure in the success of his own life only made him the more lovable.

He affected Christie like a burst of warm sunshine on a cold autumn day, or a strong wind on the hills. Other men he could criticize, studying their characters and motives, but he accepted Henry Pargetter as one accepts the good things of this world—air and light and water—in wordless gratitude.

" You're just in the nick of time to settle a dispute between Ned and Miss Boscombe," said Christie, when

Mr. Pargetter had managed to find a place and lighted his cigar.

"What's the subject?" asked the big man, smiling at Ettie as if he had known her all her life.

"Ned's work. Miss Boscombe thinks it is wrong to glorify the gutter."

"Oh, Chris, that's a very brusque way of putting it!" protested Ettie.

"I don't profess to know anything about Art, my dear boy," said Mr. Pargetter, who believed, as a matter of fact, that he knew all about everything. "But if Mr. Millidew's drawings don't give any pleasure, on account of his subjects, I should say they were bad pictures."

"I can't see it, if they are true," put in one of the men.

"Every picture ought to be delectable, first of all," said Ettie.

"Carry that idea to a conclusion, and we arrive at sugar and spice and all that's nice," said Millidew.

"That will never happen to you, Ned," said Christie. "You overdo the spice, but your worst enemy would not call you nice."

"I hope not."

"Let's have a look at those pictures," said Mr. Pargetter.

He put on his eyeglasses to examine the cartoons, gravely shook his head over them, and then chuckled.

"I can't give any opinion," he said. "No doubt Miss Boscombe is right. They are clever, but highly objectionable. Of course I can see that. Highly objectionable!"

He looked at Millidew severely over the rim of his glasses. The artist saw the twinkle in his eye.

"What do you want for the set?" he asked after a long pause.

Everybody laughed except Pearl and Ettie; the former because she did not see anything to laugh at, the latter because she thought Mr. Pargetter was shockingly inconsistent.

"Are you going to decorate your new house in town with

original Millidews, Mr. Pargetter?" asked Houghton Buckley.

"No, I shall hang them up in my office."

"For your private and personal delectation?"

"Exactly, my boy. I'm not like your father, Houghton. I like to make a home of my office. I've heard Mr. Buckley say that he tries to forget his business directly he shuts the door of his City house behind him. I can't understand it. Nothing interests me so much as my work. I love it and everything to do with it. There's no finer sight in the world to me than our works, no music like the sob of our machinery, and no colour in the sky more beautiful than the flames from our mighty fires."

"Don't forget your picturesque smoke-stacks, Mr. Pargetter," laughed Houghton.

"No wonder you like my drawings of the gutter, when a modern factory, all grime and sweat and labour, moves you to blank verse," said Millidew, with a disagreeable sneer that was quite lost on Pargetter.

"I never go into our works without hearing the clang and clash of the old forges of the world," continued the boiler manufacturer. "I never see our men without thinking of that verse in the Old Testament, 'Seest thou a man delight in his business? He shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men.'"

"Do you know, there's a gorgeous swing in scriptural verse!" said one of the young men, as if he had made a novel discovery.

"I know a man who has given up reading everything but the Bible," added another. "He thinks an enormous lot of it."

"That's very good of him," observed Millidew.

"Oh, what havers!" exclaimed Mr. Ferguson, impatiently, looking up from Dr. MacDougall. "I don't believe in reading the Bible for its style. It should be read for its truth. What do you say, Chris?"

"I?"

Christie gave a slight start. He had not heard the last few sentences, for Mr. Pargetter's words about his factory had set him thinking—drawing pictures in his mind—of the labourers of the world, all down the ages.

"Yes, what do you say?" repeated his friend. "Are you a Christian?"

"Of course I am," he answered quietly. "Even my name proclaims it, Felix Christie—Happy Christian."

"Yes, but what sort of a Christian?" cried one of the men.

"I'll leave that to other people to determine," said Christie.

Pearl was annoyed. She thought he should have answered, "I am a member of the Established Church," or "I come of a Methodist family," or "My people are Wesleyans"; but to simply assert that he was a Christian, without any conventional lowering of the voice or eyelids, struck her as most eccentric. She thoroughly disliked eccentricity.

"Oh, Chris!" she exclaimed.

He had no idea that her sense of propriety was offended. Their eyes met as she spoke his name, and he forgot everything in the contemplation of her beauty.

How utterly he loved this girl! All hope, all ambition, all joy, all the depth of his soul rushed out to meet her. He would have died for her sake as gladly as he lived to serve her.

The friends surrounding him were as shadowy, in the flaming light of his love, as those other shadows of his brain that haunted all his waking hours.

Houghton Buckley, quick and observant, caught the glance that passed between his friend and the fair-haired, blue-eyed girl. A new idea came into his head, not altogether a pleasing idea, by the expression that passed over his face.

He waited impatiently for the long evening to close, but no one would have suspected it, for Houghton could wear good humour and gay indifference like a mask.

Mr. Pargetter, who believed in early hours at both ends of the day, was the first guest to leave. Houghton outstayed all the others, chatting with Millidew until Christie, who had gone out with Pearl and Ettie, returned.

"Watchman, what of the night?" he said.

"A watery sky, but no rain," answered Christie.

"Then I'll walk home," said Houghton.

"It's past two!" exclaimed Millidew, yawning horribly.

"Come out with me, Chris," said Houghton. "You may as well make a dawn of it. Will you come too, Ned?"

Millidew muttered that he would see him in another place first, growled a good night and went to bed.

"I knew he would refuse or I shouldn't have asked him," said Houghton, as they turned out of the house.

"Ned doesn't like the night or the morning out of doors," said Christie. "He generally spends the former in a mist of tobacco and brandy fumes, and the latter in bed."

"Then he isn't up-to-date," said Houghton. "One doesn't drink or smoke his senses away nowadays. It isn't good form."

"Is that the best argument you can put forward for temperate living?" asked his companion.

"I think it's a very good one. Which way?"

They had reached the end of the Lane.

"Yours," said Christie. "I suppose you're homeward bound?"

"Yes."

They were silent for a minute, the sound of their feet clicking smartly on the pavement, already dry.

"What a sweet girl that is!" said Houghton suddenly.

Christie's thoughts leapt to Pearl.

"I knew you would think she was beautiful. I was anxious for you to meet each other," he answered.

"I shouldn't call her at all beautiful," said Houghton decidedly. "But she struck me as being so very sympathetic and responsive, gentle and quick-witted, and that's a rare combination of qualities in a girl."

"Oh, you mean Ettie Boscombe!"

It did not occur to Christie that the certainty of his exclamation was not a compliment to Pearl.

"I thought you were speaking of Miss Henning," he added.

Houghton gave him a swift glance.

"No, but I'm quite willing to speak about Miss Henning. There is no need to discuss whether she is beautiful or not. It's patent to all men. She made me think of the pictures of girls that are so popular just now on the covers of new novels. They are meant to attract purchasers, but it's a question whether there's anything worth reading behind them."

"I often wonder whether you are only flippant, Houghton, or do you mean anything you say?" said his companion.

"It all depends on how you take me," said Houghton. "Am I right in saying that on the present subject you're inclined to take me seriously?"

"You're quite right. It is the most serious subject in the world to me."

"By Jove! Of course, I see that she's a most attractive girl to look at, but surely, my dear fellow——"

He stopped speaking abruptly, pondered for a while, and began his sentence again.

"Surely, my dear fellow, you're not going to handicap yourself so severely? Think of what it means for a man to be bound to a woman of utterly different tastes, education, and position from himself? Try to look beyond the honeymoon, Chris."

Christie laughed.

"There's no prospect of a honeymoon at present, Houghton. We might afford a week-end at Brighton, but that's about all."

"I think every man is bound to use his judgment, and be guided by his good sense, in choosing a wife," young Buckley went on, not heeding the interruption. "There's

no getting out of an unsuitable marriage. Any other entanglement—well, it can be managed. Don't lose your head. That's the open secret of success in life, public or private. If you want to lose your heart over a woman, or even lose your money, do it! But never lose your head."

Christie laughed again.

"Have you always practised what you preach, Houghton?"

"Yes, I hope so," replied Houghton. "But we're not discussing my affairs just now. We are discussing your own."

"Why should we?" said Christie, looking up at the sky, where stars faintly gleamed through vapoury clouds.

"I know I'm hard," his companion continued, "but I believe in being hard—fit in mind as well as body—strong—able to fight and resist temptation. You're too easy-going, Chris. You've been swept up by the first pair of blue eyes that came along, like Ricky-Ticky in 'Man and Superman.' Pearl, do you call her? Don't forget that there are artificial pearls, very shiny and beamy at first, but with no real lustre. Their beauty wears off, and then—if a man's been rash enough to give a high price for a specimen—well, he doesn't care to show it to his friends, but he can't get rid of it."

Christie paid little heed. He was re-living the minute of parting with his love, when her soft cheek was pressed to his and her hands were locked round his neck.

"Well?" said Houghton impatiently, as he made no answer.

They had reached the Buckleys' house, and stopped at the bottom of the steps.

"It's too late, old man! It's no good," said Christie. "But console yourself with remembering that I'm not at all an important person. I needn't think about my 'position.' Now if I were the heir to a fortune or a great name"—he gaily tapped Houghton on the chest—"it might be a serious catastrophe, according to your code of life, to

marry a girl who was only beautiful and good, instead of being rich and popular in society."

Houghton shook hands, shrugged his shoulders with the air of a man who makes the best of a bad bargain, and took out his latchkey. Christie had turned away from the house when he called him back.

"Chris! I forgot to tell you, speaking of my great name—it's your adjective, you know, not mine—to look out for a surprise in the list of Birthday Honours next month. You'll probably find the chief among the baronets."

Christie, surprised and pleased, stretched out his hand once more.

"I congratulate you, Houghton, and I congratulate Mr. Buckley most sincerely. I'll tell him so if our long-delayed meeting ever takes place. I'm delighted to hear any good news that touches you, old man; but I can't help wondering——"

He left the sentence unfinished, but Houghton guessed what he hesitated to say.

"You wonder what my father has done to be made a baronet? So will a great many other people, no doubt."

"Of course I have heard of Mr. Buckley's interest in various philanthropic schemes and the big amount of money he has given to charity——" began Christie.

"Exactly!" said Houghton, over his shoulder, as he opened the door. "You have probably heard also that he is a very keen politician. He is a party man in every sense of the word—behind the scenes as it were—and always ready to support the Party; but, of course, that has nothing whatever to do with the honour the King has seen fit to offer him. Of course not! Good night, Chris."

CHAPTER XVII

A DINNER AT BUCKLEY'S

"TO think that I should live to see the day!" exclaimed Millidew.

"What day?" asked Christie.

"When a pal of mine should be invited to dine at Buckley's, and that pal only a common story-writer. Invited to dine at Buckley's for all the world as if you were an equal. These are levelling days. You don't take it in, Chris."

"Oh, shut up!" muttered Christie, who was sitting at his desk behind the shop-window in Drury Lane reading Boswell, while Millidew, who always talked as he worked, was colouring a set of his printed cartoons at the table.

"Your confounded colonial pride blinds you to the glory and honour of the thing," Millidew went on. "But let me warn you against presuming on Sir Charles Buckley's condescension. Remember that people like you and me always sit below the salt at such a table as his. Whatever he says, don't contradict him. Don't argue. Don't air your views. Don't get absent-minded, as you're apt to, and sit staring into vacancy. In short, mind your manners."

"I'm not afraid of my manners," said Christie, shutting his book; "it's my clothes that haunt me."

"Don't be miserly," said Millidew. "Of course you must get a new suit. You leave your mark on every shilling you earn."

Christie thrust his hands deep in his pockets, with an expression on his face of intense gloom. It was true that

he hated spending any of Pearl's money on himself. He always thought of it as Pearl's money.

"Yes, I suppose I must get a suit," he said at last. "But I wish I had the courage to dress unconventionally like Professor Wiggins. Have you seen him in his frock-coat, with a straw hat and red tie?"

"Well, you couldn't go to the Buckley dinner in a frocker and a Socialistic tie," said Millidew.

"No, but I might make a compromise of my costume, Ned, by wearing the grey trousers of my new lounge suit and hiring a black coat and vest. I wonder what Lady Buckley would think of her son's friend as I marched into the drawing-room."

"I've got a better scheme than that," said Millidew. "Send word in the morning that you've had a stroke of paralysis and lost the use of your legs, so that you must be carried to your place at the table before the other people arrive, and carried off again directly the dining-room is empty. Nobody would dream of peeping under the cloth to see whether your trousers matched your coat."

Christie laughed, and picked up a card and a note lying on the mantelpiece. The one announced that Mrs. Pargetter was At Home on the 3rd and 4th of the coming month, and the other was an informal invitation to dine with Sir Charles and Lady Buckley.

"I'm very curious to see our chief," said Christie.

"Haven't you met him at the office?" asked Millidew.

"No, I've missed him half a dozen times. There's a touch of Spenlow and Jorkins about Ferguson. He doesn't like the men to deal with Buckley at first hand."

"Are you going to speak to him about 'The Question'?"

"It will depend on circumstances. I am doing my best for 'The Question,'" answered Christie. "I have made up my mind not to give it up."

He thought, nevertheless, a great deal about "The Question," and the probable attitude of Sir Charles Buckley

in regard to that highly remunerative publication. Houghton avoided the subject, feeling instinctively his friend's disappointment; but Christie heard from Mr. Ferguson and others that the practical young man was well pleased with its success.

The night of the dinner was fine and clear, so Christie walked from Drury Lane to Grosvenor Square.

"Don't daydream and forget where you're going!" had been Millidew's parting words, knowing his habit of wandering through the streets absorbed in everything he saw and heard, weaving the romances of his brain out of the most commonplace surroundings.

He laughed at his friend's warning, but arrived at the house, thanks to it, at the correct time and in the expectantly happy mood of the ideal dinner-guest, ready to entertain and be entertained, pleased with himself and everything else.

Court, the butler who had reminded Christie of the ogre in charge of a fairy palace, received him with kind and heavy condescension. Christie smiled to himself as he followed one of the ogre's attendant slaves, a thin young footman, upstairs, thinking of his first dinner-party in London. It was in Millidew's attic in Waterloo Road, when the guests had been obliged to sit on the floor or the bed, and it had been necessary, before the *hors d'œuvre* could be served, to open a sardine-tin with a chisel and a pocket-knife.

He was eager to see his host, having already had the doubtful pleasure of meeting his hostess, who had made him very conscious of the fact that the young men from Buckley's in the City were admitted on sufferance to Mrs. Buckley's house in Grosvenor Square.

He had not entered the drawing-room since his first visit, when Houghton had taken him to see the portrait of his father, and then it had impressed Christie as a finely proportioned, but cold and uninteresting room. Now, when the door was thrown open, he was enchanted by the

beautiful colouring of the pale lilac walls, the soft light of shaded lamps, and the faint scent of Parma violets.

There were five people in the room. Houghton, his mother, and Mr. Pargetter were sitting in one of the big open windows, where the silk curtains hardly stirred in the warm night breeze.

They all greeted him with smiles and words of welcome, perfunctorily on the part of Lady Buckley, cordially on the part of Houghton, warmly and effusively on the part of Mr. Pargetter.

He then turned, at a word from Houghton, to be introduced to Sir Charles, who was standing on the other side of the room, underneath his own portrait, talking to Miss Pargetter.

Christie shot a lightning glance from the man to the painting, as he stepped forward to take the hand of his host, struck by the extraordinary truth and power of the artist's work.

He had only seen it once before, but it had made so deep an impression on his mind that the features and expression of the living man seemed as familiar to him as any face that he had ever known.

He saw, however, that the famous portrait-painter had not succeeded in portraying, perhaps on account of the thoughtful pose he had chosen, the look of virility and energy in abeyance that distinguished Charles Buckley.

His voice was very pleasant and cordial, as he greeted the young man, but his eyes—restless and moody, as Christie had expected to find them—were turned away from him at once to the contemplation, with evident approval, of the fresh and winning beauty of the young girl at his side.

Rosalind Pargetter was twenty-two, self-possessed, unaffected, intelligent; the modern girl at her best; as ready to talk politics as to play golf; interested in all up-to-date topics in her social world; a devoted daughter, a loyal friend; untroubled by matrimonial schemes, but

determined, when prudence and affection told her that the right man and the right hour had come, to evolve into a good wife and a popular hostess.

In brief, Miss Rosalind Pargetter ordered the years of her life as she ordered the hours of her day, making a definite number of sensible plans, but leaving herself a refreshing freedom in regard to details.

Mr. Ferguson and his sister, who arrived directly after Christie, were the only other guests.

Miss Ferguson, who was a big woman with high cheek-bones and sandy hair like her brother, wore a silk dress of her youth, with a ruffle of fine old lace round the V-shaped neck, fastened by a cairngorm brooch the size of a five-shilling piece.

Her appearance was in striking contrast to Lady Buckley's, who was still handsome, and wore her simple, extravagant dress and fine rubies with conscious grace and perfect ease, although the Scotch family from which Margaret Ferguson sprang had been powerful lairds long before the Houghton family, who claimed Annie Buckley as their daughter, had managed to scrape their golden pennies together in petty trade.

The former lady was too well bred, and the latter too sensible, to boast of learning on the one side or wealth on the other—for the Fergusons had evolved into scholars and divines and the Houghtons into financiers and merchants—so that they met on the ground of mutual respect and old friendship, knowing and appreciating each other's good qualities—the cairngorm, as it were, set off by the rubies and the rubies improved by the cairngorm.

Joseph Buckley, a delicate boy of twenty, good-looking, but peevish, slipped into the room after the Fergusons, and instantly made his way to Felix Christie, ignoring his mother's "Come here, darling!" as he passed her chair.

"Of course I'm glad to see you, Chris," he said in a low, grumbling voice. "But I wish you'd dined with us when we were all alone. I hate a crowd."

" You can't call four people a crowd, Joe," protested Houghton, who had overheard him.

" Six people, you mean. I wanted to have Chris when only you and I were at home. Mother won't give us any peace, and I want to talk to Chris, in fact to both of you, about a very serious matter."

" I hope you've not been making a fool of yourself again," said Houghton in a low voice, with an angry glance at his brother as he walked away.

" You hear how unreasonable he is, Chris ! " exclaimed the youth. " I simply say that I want to have a serious talk and he instantly jumps to a wrong conclusion. That's the worst of Houghton. He always judges the present by the past. He harps on the same old string till I'm sick of it."

" What is it all about ? " asked Christie.

" I can't tell you just now, it's too long a story. Look here, Chris ! Let me come over to your place some time to-morrow. Will you ? You're such a patient, good, sensible old fellow, so different from Houghton. When will you be at home ? Of course I don't want to talk before Millidew."

" Then come in the afternoon."

" Right you are ! "

Christie was not sorry that a second summons from his mother called Joe away, for he wanted to look at Sir Charles, who was still talking, or rather listening, to Miss Pargetter. But he did not give her undivided attention, frequently glancing at the other members of the party, ready to take a share in their conversation too, but always turning his eyes back to the pretty face of the girl at the second when she expected an answer.

He did not seem to notice Christie until they went down to dinner.

A self-conscious guest might have suspected that he was purposely neglected by his host, but such an idea did not occur to the Canadian. He felt certain, without any

obvious reason, that Sir Charles Buckley would become his friend, and waited patiently and coolly for a sign of the truth of this inner conviction. It came unexpectedly after a light speech of his son's.

"We ought to celebrate the success of 'The Question' to-night," said Houghton, "as it is the first time you three have met together"—indicating Sir Charles, Mr. Ferguson, and Christie.

"I don't think you should include me," said his father, smiling, "for my contribution to that success is one penny for a copy I bought at the railway station the day of my return. Perhaps I ought to say three farthings and a fraction of a farthing, as the remainder will, I suppose, return to Buckley's as my share."

"On the contrary, I think your share will be the whole penny, minus the fraction of a farthing," said Mr. Ferguson.

"If I pocket so much, Alick, who pockets the fraction?" asked Buckley.

"It is unequally divided between the editor, subs, and staff," said Ferguson.

Sir Charles caught Christie's smile. He looked at the young man with some interest, having forgotten until that minute that he was one of the principal writers on "The Question." One recollection gave birth to another, and he suddenly spoke of Christie's book.

"What has happened to London since we started 'The Question,' Mr. Christie? I have looked in vain for some of your 'Dawn' discoveries. That was a rare little book of yours! A gem! Or rather, a cluster of gems."

"In very poor setting," observed Mr. Ferguson in a low voice, alluding to the binding.

"I am afraid 'The Question' does not inspire me," said Christie frankly. "Perhaps I have not been doing my best."

"You are young to pot-boil," said his host. "That is an accomplishment, as a rule, of much more experienced hands. We usually find, at Buckley's, that our new writers give us of their best."

"I have tried to do so," answered Christie, slightly flushing.

"But 'The Question' does not inspire you?" repeated the older man. "Don't take me too seriously, Mr. Christie. Somehow, I should not have expected 'The Question' to 'inspire' anybody, but we won't quibble over words. You mean its success does not encourage you? Houghton is delighted, and he has much less cause to be than you have."

"But I'm not artistic or literary, you know," said Houghton.

"My dear boy, you're only stating an obvious fact. Nobody would imagine for a minute that you were," said his father.

Christie noticed how his face changed and softened as he looked at his handsome son.

"I can't agree with you, Charles," put in Lady Buckley in her peculiarly dragging voice, as if it were an effort to pull the words along. "Houghton has a great appreciation of both literature and art. I know he always disparages himself, but that is only a pose."

"I assure you, mother——" began Houghton, laughing.

"Don't assure me anything of the kind!" interrupted Lady Buckley. "I say it is only a pose."

"Then we must pay him the compliment of saying that he assumes it very successfully," said her husband, still smiling at his son. "Has it ever occurred to you, Mr. Christie, that Houghton is really an artistic, thoughtful, literary man?"

He turned sharply to Christie, who was startled into answering with perfect candour.

"I'm sure he's not, sir!"

"Thank you, Chris!" cried the subject of the little dispute.

"You speak as if Mr. Christie had flattered you!" said Miss Pargetter.

"It is flattery in a way, Rosalind," her father put in,

before Houghton could reply. "There are far too many literary men nowadays. It is the fashion to write, not to do; to analyse, not to act; to discuss, not to struggle.

"The modern young man is much too egotistical and introspective," continued Mr. Pargetter. "When I was a boy we lived—we didn't talk. We loved—we didn't make up little wishy-washy poems about it. We trained our muscles and we let our emotions take care of themselves."

"I have no belief in the superiority of the good old days over the better young ones," said Sir Charles. "I suppose you mean the good old days of your own youth, Pargetter, when sermons were long and dinners short, when men rode on giraffe-like bicycles and women were not allowed to drive alone in hansom-cabs."

"The high bicycle was splendid for the nerves," said Mr. Pargetter; "and perhaps it would be better for us all to-day if women were still forbidden to dash about all by themselves."

As no remark of this nature can be made in the presence of women without provoking strong opposition, or equally strong approval, Mr. Pargetter was plunged, before he had time to escape, into the turbid waters of a discussion on the altered position of women, inevitably leading to the question of their parliamentary suffrage.

Sir Charles seized the opportunity to talk to Christie, asking his opinion on the subject under discussion, but reserving his own. He encouraged the young man to express himself freely on other topics, and listened thoughtfully, with his eyes on his face, not restfully studying it, but perpetually changing their focus—now on his brow, now on his lips, now on his throat—an irritating habit, Christie thought, but he soon grew accustomed to it. He was prepared for Sir Charles's apparently losing the meaning of his words now and again, for his mind, like his eyes, seemed to be constantly shifting from point to point.

"What was that?" he would ask, when Christie paused

for a reply. "I don't quite grasp your meaning. Tell me again."

A polite way of saying that he had not paid attention.

After this short, but intimate conversation, Christie was hardly prepared for his host's sudden change of manner not half an hour afterwards.

Directly the ladies left the room Sir Charles, without a glance at Christie, crossed to the opposite side of the table and sat down between Mr. Pargetter and his younger son, with an arm thrown over the back of Joe's chair, turning his back on the guest with whom he had been talking with so much interest.

Houghton's quick eyes caught the expression on his friend's face, for Sir Charles's attitude and manner deliberately excluded Christie from the conversation. He promptly made amends for his father's little act of discourtesy, and thought no more of the incident.

Christie, who was not in the least offended or even hurt, would have been quite happy to sit still for the rest of the evening pondering over his host, for Sir Charles's personality made a strong appeal to his imagination.

His success and business talents, important factors as they were in judging his character, seemed, to Christie's keen intuition, to contribute but little to his attraction, resembling the wealth they produced as being outside himself, independent of the inner man—the means to an end, and no more.

His political ambition, although it had until recently been entirely subservient to the development of Buckley's, was probably the strongest interest in his life, and he hoped to stand for Parliament at the first favourable opportunity.

He was a fairly popular man, but never moved his friends or the men who worked for him to rash enthusiasm, for there was a certain coldness and personal indifference to affection underlying the invariable tact and consideration of his treatment of others.

He was never elated and never unduly depressed. He

took his pleasures, if not sadly, in a calm and critical manner. He was capable of great concentration, and had displayed at one or two periods of his career unbounded courage in the conduct of his affairs. He was devoted to his two sons, but cared very little for anybody else in the world.

His relations with Lady Buckley, who understood him thoroughly, were in perfect harmony with his code of life. They had once loved each other well, but youth was over, and they were excellent friends.

Not without reason did his wife boast that she was "every inch a Houghton," for her acceptance of Charles Buckley, at the very beginning of his prosperous career, had shown she possessed the foresight of the family.

Whether he would have been quite so successful without the driving-power of a Houghton behind him is decidedly an open question. There had been times, in their early married life, before Sir Charles had developed into the man whom Christie knew, when his wife had almost regretted her faith in him, when the driving-power suddenly failed to urge him on, the whip was useless, and he was indifferent to the goal.

Lady Buckley had tactfully forgotten the weaknesses of her husband's youth, when his dreams were not all of gold and his heart was fresh, for he had long fulfilled the Houghton ideal of success.

After dinner, to Christie's great delight, Rosalind Pargetter sang for them. He admired her very much, although she was an utterly different type of girl from his lovely Pearl Henning.

She had a light soprano voice, excellently trained. Her father, leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed, listened in a kind of rapture, regretting the absence of Margaret, Susie, and Grace, his three younger daughters. Rosalind smiled at him indulgently, far too sensible and kind to be annoyed with his extravagant praises.

Houghton watched her with approving eyes. He did not

simply admire her sweetness and good temper, as Christie did, but deliberately noted all her good points.

She was very pretty, to begin with ; she talked well, but not too much ; she was gay and unaffected ; they had many tastes in common ; Sir Charles evidently liked her, and he had great reliance on his father's judgment ; best of all, Houghton was conscious of a quickening of the pulse, a pleasurable excitement in her company, that he knew would probably end in his falling in love.

How deeply in love remained to be seen. That was always an uncertainty, the point on which former experience was no criterion.

Joe Buckley, in spite of his mother's attempts to draw him into conversation with Miss Ferguson and herself, anent the intermarriages of the Royal Family and the arrangements of a fête to be held in the grounds of Lady Buckley's country house, felt himself neglected and utterly wretched.

He was a moody youth at the best of times, with none of the common sense of the Houghtons, so richly inherited by his brother.

Had he been obliged to work for his living, instead of being able to indulge every whim of a nature inclined to sloth and luxury, Joe would have been much happier. His father, who would have been quick to acknowledge this fact in anybody else's son, could not see it in the case of his own. The boy had been his favourite in childhood, but they had drifted apart.

Sir Charles ignored Christie for the remainder of the evening, but Lady Buckley, who, although she had considered it quite unnecessary to invite him, never neglected her guests, talked to him with great interest of his Canadian home.

She was anxious to hear whether the difficulty of obtaining efficient servants was so great in the colonies as in the old country. Did Mr. Christie's mother experience the usual hardships of English mistresses ?

Mr. Christie had a mental vision of his mother's only domestic assistant, a " wash-lady," in a white print gown, who divided her time between languidly rubbing the clothes up and down a board, soapsuds to the elbows, and drinking big cups of weak green tea or eating slices of cold pie.

Finding him ignorant of the domestic problem and inclined to treat it lightly, his hostess cross-examined him on the subject of Canadian farming, giving her own views, which were very decided, on the benefits of emigration for younger sons—other people's, not her beloved Joe.

Miss Ferguson, who was one of those wise, self-contained Scotchwomen who only speak when they have something to say, listened attentively to the conversation, capping a little story told by Christie, when Lady Buckley returned to the servant question, in the following manner.

" I recollect that my mother once had a hired girl from the States, when I was quite a little fellow," said Christie. " But she only stopped with us for two weeks. My mother was wonderfully patient, or she bottled up her impatience and corked it down, for Miss Aurelia Blanche Tudor—yes, that was really her name, Lady Buckley—was the most independent, cool young woman I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. She gave two ' surprise parties ' in our house during the fortnight, joined a singing-class that took her out on alternate nights, and expected my mother to starch and iron her waists and handkerchiefs."

" I never heard of such impertinence ! " exclaimed the horrified Lady Buckley. " Didn't your mother order her out of the house ? "

" No, but she gave her warning. ' Good-bye, sonny ! ' Miss Aurelia Blanche Tudor said to me. ' Your mar's only ben sassy to me once, but I'm willin' to overlook it and part pleasant ! ' "

" Thank heaven we do not have to encounter such experiences in England," said Lady Buckley ; " even in these revolutionary days."

"But we meet the same spirit in another form," said Miss Ferguson. "An old friend of ours in Banffshire, Sir Walter Halkirk, had had the same gillie in his service, as they generally do in the Highlands, for the whole of his life. This old man, who was named Andrew Keith, made a speech at one of the festivities given in honour of the eldest son's majority. Andrew was to propose the health of Sir Walter. 'The laird has lived amang us, man and boy, for close on fifty years,' he said, 'and while we hae served him wi' devotion, dinna lat's forget hoo he has lookit after us. Aye, we're a' vera prood o' you, Sir Walter '—turning to his master with his glass raised—'and if yer son follows in the footsteps o' his father he need niver look for anither hame. We'll keep him amang 's a' the days o' his life!'"

"I cannot see any similarity between the two cases," said Lady Buckley. "Can you, Mr. Christie?"

"It is certainly a similarity hard to find," he answered, "but I think it is there all the same. Independence is a strong plant, with many different kinds of blossoms."

Sir Charles, when the guests were departing, invited Christie to stop a little longer.

"Houghton tells me you take an interest in my old prints," he said. "I should like to show you my latest acquisition. Will you come into my room for a few minutes?"

Christie gladly consented. He had already said good night to Lady Buckley and her two sons, and Sir Charles did not ask either of them to accompany himself and his guest to the small study on the second floor.

He switched on the electric light, motioned Christie to a seat, and went away for a few minutes, returning in a velvet smoking-jacket.

The room was changed from the day when Christie first entered it with Houghton, when it looked empty and dull, in spite of pictures and furniture. Now a smouldering fire glowed on the hearth; books and papers were scattered about; several of Millidew's latest political cartoons were

pinned on the wall, and there were several beautiful orchids, in cut-glass vases, on the mantelpiece and writing-table.

"These are from our place in Herefordshire," said Sir Charles, indicating the flowers. "I am very fond of orchids. This is the popular Odontoglossum, you know, and this is the Cattleya. We had a really fine show last year. Neither of the boys cares for this sort of thing, and my wife's pleasure in a garden begins and ends in a mass of roses. We have tons of them!"

"I know very little about orchids," said Christie.

"They are a most captivating study," said Sir Charles, sitting down by the fire, facing his guest. "Not only the exotic species, but all the little wild orchids that the majority of people hardly notice, or wantonly tread under foot as they go through a wood, such as the twayblade, with its inconspicuous green blossoms—fairy flowers!—or the fragrant butterfly, or the tiny, delightful lady's tresses. That's the new print behind you, 'The City of London in 1837.'"

Christie rose to examine it. The older man looked at him keenly as he held the frame under the light.

"You don't look like a Canadian, Mr. Christie," he said, suddenly. "I knew the Lower Provinces of Canada fairly well in my youth—New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec, and Ontario as far as Toronto—but I seem to remember that the Canadians were more—more—aggressive in appearance, for want of a better word, with their pushing shoulders and short, strong features."

"I was born in New England," said Christie, resuming his seat. "My father and mother were both New Englanders."

"Ah, that accounts for it!" exclaimed the other in a tone of relief. "I couldn't think of the type of man you recalled to my mind, and now I can trace the resemblance to the fine old New England stock; it's very slight in your case, but still unmistakable. Are you from Maine?"

"Yes!" said Christie, in some surprise at the question.

" You must have a good memory and extraordinary discrimination, Sir Charles, if you are able to distinguish Maine from Vermont men so easily, or New Hampshire from Massachusetts."

" I'm afraid I can't claim such a talent," rejoined his host. " Maine happens to be the only New England State I visited, so it is always the first that occurs to my mind. Why did you leave that beautiful country of yours for such a place as London ? "

" Houghton told me that you were devoted to London," said Christie, " but your tone implies——"

" Yes ! I am devoted to London," he interrupted. " But I am not a boy with the whole of life before me. The things that satisfy and enrich youth no longer satisfy or enrich a man of my age and acquired tastes. Canada is a country of golden opportunities, in every sense of the word, and I think it is a great mistake for any young fellow to turn his back on first opportunities. They are like first thoughts, the best."

" There were no golden opportunities for me in the little town of Mapleville," said Christie, with a smile.

" I was not altogether speaking personally," said Sir Charles. " Although I can't see why you could not have written those artistic sketches of yours—etchings, silverpoint drawings ; I don't know how to praise them enough ! —under the blue skies of Ontario as well as in the grime of Drury Lane."

Christie told him, as briefly as he could, the original reason of his journey to England, but Sir Charles was not satisfied with a bare outline of his early struggles. He made him go into details, not so much by asking pointed questions, as by the friendly interest, the sympathetic comprehension, and the intimate knowledge of life in all classes that his few words, tactfully spoken at the right minute, conveyed.

He listened very attentively, looking wonderfully like his portrait, with one thin hand supporting his cheek, and

his eyes, no longer shifting from feature to feature, on the eager face of the young man.

"You make very light of all these troubles, my boy," he said, after Christie had described his interview with the specialist who had examined his arm and his subsequent resolution to give up the violin; "but you must have tasted the most bitter cup that any man can hold to his lips—failure of his heart's desire. Oh, I know that life has its compensations," he went on, quickly, when Christie would have spoken. "I know that you were born a writer, not a violinist; but that first ambition of yours, in its freshness and purity of aim, was like the very music that you tell me you heard in your brain and heart, but that you could never play. It is impossible to recall the days of our youth—old simile, trite phrase!—so it is wisdom to forget them."

He was silent for a minute, sitting with his eyes on the fire and his hands clasped between his knees; then he shook off the dark cloud of melancholy that had been gathering round him while Christie talked and resumed his former position, leaning an elbow on the writing-table and looking at his guest.

"So the fiddle-strings snapped and you took to the pen!" he said gaily. "That was a very happy idea, although I am sure, to return to what I said a while ago, that your own country is more in need of writers than we are."

"Why didn't you stop on the other side yourself, if I may ask the question, as you like it so much?" said Christie.

First Sir Charles laughed, then dropped his hands to his sides and groaned.

"My dear sir, that question is answered in a single word—Buckley's," he said. "Perhaps you don't know that my father started the firm with the publication of the 'Orb'—it was a penny in those days and of different politics—but Fate had given him so many hard buffets, that when he managed at last to get on his feet he was so very weak that

the first puff of wind knocked him over, and he never rose again.

"He had been a strong, healthy man all his life, and made a boast that he never wore an overcoat, never carried an umbrella, and never had had a cold. Anxieties and troubles, however, made him look like an old man before he was out of the fifties.

"My dear mother, just when the 'Orb' was beginning to twinkle, persuaded him to buy a good thick overcoat, as he walked down to his little office in Shoe Lane from our home at Clapham every day in all sorts of weather.

"Well, he bought the overcoat, managed to take a chill the first time he put it on, refused to take any care of himself, and died within a fortnight from congestion of the lungs. I was out of England at the time, but I returned immediately and took over the paper."

"Had you had any experience of newspaper work?" said Christie, thinking that the beginning of this remarkable man's career, in some points, resembled his own.

"Oh yes! I was a journalist before I went to America," said Sir Charles; "but, of course, I had never held a responsible position. Mr. Ferguson was my right-hand then, as he is to-day. I hope you appreciate Ferguson. He is a model for any young man—strenuous in effort, loyal in friendship, and of strictest integrity. Then he is always prudent—do you know, Mr. Christie, that our friend's prudence is his leading characteristic? Perhaps you have found that out for yourself?"

"Long ago," said Christie.

"There have been times in our lives," continued Sir Charles, "when he and I have almost quarrelled over his canny carefulness. I confess it has saved me a world of trouble, and helped to make Buckley's what it is; but Ferguson might have been a great man if he had known when to be bold as well as he knows when to be cautious. That is the difference between us, and it would be false modesty on my part not to see it. He is as clever a man as

I am, not without foresight, and more of a master of detail than I shall ever be, but he doesn't grasp possibilities with the firmness that turns them into realities.

"We shape our own course, we successful men. We know when to hazard everything apparently regardless of consequences—only apparently, mark you—and we know when to hold back. Individual tastes and inclinations have nothing whatever to do with the peculiar force of character that is possessed, in a greater or less degree, by every man whose name spells success—complete, sustained, worldly success."

"Is it always force of character, not originality, or the use of a great gift for organization," said Christie.

"Always, in the class of men I speak of," answered Sir Charles. "That is, the men of action and affairs, the governors, rulers, masters of others."

"Fine tools cannot be made to do their work by force," said Christie.

"Not directly, but indirectly," rejoined his companion, delicately lifting one of the sprays of orchids with his forefinger to admire its rich purple tone.

Even Felix Christie, with his naturally keen and observant mind, could hardly believe that this man, with his delicacy of manner, his virile, but light physique, his evident enjoyment of all that was reposeful and easy in life, had swept innumerable obstacles out of his path, amassed a great fortune, and crushed many a rival out of existence.

Sir Charles looked up from the orchid and met his eyes. He guessed the thought behind them and smiled.

"It's very amusing, this game of Life, isn't it?" he said. "And we all like to win by fair means or—how did you put it?—originality or the great gift for organization?"

"Doesn't the worth of winning depend upon the stakes?" said Christie.

Sir Charles laid his hand quite affectionately on the young man's shoulder, for they had both risen. A clock in the distant hall had boomed the second hour of the morning.

" For a boy like you, Christie, the stakes to be won are most important," he said ; " but for me, the pleasure is all in the game. I have long outgrown any pleasure in my actual winnings."

" Have you ? " asked Christie, with a whimsical glance round the luxurious room.

Sir Charles laughed good-naturedly, but made no answer. He took his guest downstairs, flooding the silent house with electric light by turning on switch after switch as they slowly descended.

When he opened the front door they saw that the moon was at her full, hanging like a silver lamp in the sky. The road and pavement were as white and still as if they were covered with snow.

" Canadian night ! " exclaimed Christie, with a thrill of pleasure as he felt the fresh wind on his face.

" One can almost hear the sweet music of the sleigh-bells," said Sir Charles.

They parted with mutual words of friendship, grateful on the one side, cordial on the other, and Christie went away with a light heart and a quick step.

Sir Charles watched him go, musing on his youth and enthusiasm, for several seconds ; then he shuddered, as if the wind had grown suddenly cold, turned back into the house, and quickly closed the door.

CHAPTER XVIII

JOE BUCKLEY'S LOVE AFFAIRS

SIR CHARLES, on the morning following his talk with Felix Christie, arrived at Buckley's in the City at nearly as early an hour as Mr. Ferguson.

His long and frequent absences from London had been a source of annoyance to his manager, who only sympathized with his political or social ambitions in so far as they did not clash with the interests of Buckley's.

Sir Charles's room was on the first floor of the house where Christie had had his memorable interview with Mr. Ferguson and Houghton.

Unlike the office of the Scotchman, with its cumbersome furniture and flaming posters, Sir Charles's surroundings were in accordance with his home tastes.

When he arrived, on this particular morning, he found a man engaged in repainting the name on his door, "Sir Charles Buckley" being substituted for "Mr. Buckley."

He watched the painter for a couple of seconds putting the finishing touches to the first word, "Sir," and mentally changed "Charles" for "Houghton." A baronetcy, for the sake of his son, had been one of the high stakes for which he had played with courage and skill in that game of life discussed with Felix Christie.

Entering his room, Buckley closed the door, put down his hat and coat, and sat down at his writing-table. He was evidently in an abstracted mood, for after glancing at a couple of letters, he threw the remainder down and leaned back in his chair, staring out of the window, but without any interest in what he saw.

Then he rose and began to walk up and down the room, but only for a few minutes, when he again seated himself, and, with an effort, concentrated his thoughts on his correspondence.

After a while he sent for Mr. Ferguson. Their conversation was long and earnest, and during the course of it Sir Charles gradually recovered his usual appearance and manner. He had looked pale and worn, his watchful manager had observed on entering, and had displayed an irritability and impatience that showed he was unwell, troubled, or out of temper.

" Don't go, Alick," said Sir Charles, when their business talk was over and Mr. Ferguson was about to leave the room ; " I want to talk to you on two other matters."

" Business, I hope ? " asked Mr. Ferguson, who disliked wasting his time at the office on personal affairs.

" Partly business," replied his chief.

Mr. Ferguson reluctantly sat down again. Sir Charles meditated for a minute, with the expression on his face that it had worn when he was alone, staring out of the window. He seemed to forget the presence of his friend.

" Well, Charlie ? "

Sir Charles gave a little start and pulled himself together.

" What do you think of Pargetter's daughter ? " he asked, lighting a cigar.

" I think she is a pretty young creature, ' most ornamental,' as Alice observed last night when we were going home from your house," answered Ferguson.

" That is very mild praise, Alick ! " said Sir Charles.

" What do you want me to say ? I thought she sang very sweetly, but with no more expression than a lintie on a bush."

" What impression did you get of her character and disposition ? Don't you think she looks sensible ? She is certainly unaffected and good-humoured," said the other.

" I thought there was a touch of the old man's canniness about her," said Mr. Ferguson. " Pargetter's one of those

simple, great-hearted men that we get out of the north of England, but they generally know how to get the best of a bargain."

"I don't consider it any disparagement to a girl to say that she is canny," said Sir Charles.

"No, I was paying the young lady a compliment."

Sir Charles knocked the ash off his cigar, then leaned back in his chair with his eyes on the ceiling, and smoked in silence for several minutes. Mr. Ferguson turned his attention to the notes he had made during their business talk.

"If we were to ask Houghton's opinion of Rosalind Pargetter," said Sir Charles, smiling a little, "I think we should both be ashamed of our lukewarm praise of an exceptionally charming girl."

"Houghton?" said Mr. Ferguson in a tone of slight surprise. "To be sure, he seemed to find her conversation very interesting, but it doesn't do to take him too seriously, Charlie, in this sort of thing, does it? She was the only girl in the room, don't forget that."

"Oh, I am not judging from last night," said Sir Charles. "It was my wife who put the idea into my head. It seems they have been meeting very frequently during the last few months, and she believes that Houghton has met his fate at last."

"Are you pleased or disappointed, Charlie?"

"On the whole, I think I am pleased," said Sir Charles. "Houghton is still very young, but he has great stability of character. One can rely on his good sense and judgment."

"I think you could say the same thing of Miss Pargetter," observed Ferguson.

"One can never be so sure of a woman," said Sir Charles lightly, "but she certainly strikes me as a very sensible girl. Of course she won't have much money."

"She's the eldest child of Pargetter-Smith's!" put in Mr. Ferguson, as if the firm of boiler manufacturers were the young lady's father.

"Yes, but Pargetter has several boys to look after," said Sir Charles. "However, that doesn't trouble me. I would rather Houghton married for love than for money."

"Well, Charlie, you speak the truth on most subjects, so I must take your word for that," said Mr. Ferguson, with a twinkle in his solemn eye. "What was the other subject you wanted to discuss with me?"

"It concerns another of our guests last night," answered his chief.

"Young Christie?" asked Mr. Ferguson.

"Yes. My dear, good Alick, why on earth did you put young Christie to work on 'The Question'?"

"Doesn't he suit it very well?" said the manager in surprise. "Isn't he doing good work? I thought that you would be pleased that I got hold of him."

"I am delighted, wholly delighted," Sir Charles hastened to reassure his friend.

"Isn't he good enough for 'The Question'?" asked Mr. Ferguson.

"No, he's much too good!" said the head of Buckley's emphatically. "You've put him into a false position, Alick. As they say in dramatic criticisms, you've made an error in casting. We want him. We must keep him, but we mustn't condemn him to penny-a-lining."

"I see he's made a very favourable impression on you, Charlie, but it doesn't do to rely on that. Let him prove that he is out of the common run before we treat him differently from other young fellows in his position."

"My dear, good Alick," said Sir Charles for the second time, "he has already proved it. We must look for straws, we needn't wait for a stack, to see which way the wind blows. I want to get hold of his first book—Houghton tells me he is writing one—I don't want to waste him on 'The Question.'"

"'The Question' is a big property already, you know, and worthy of good writers."

"I know it's a big property, thanks to the originality of

the idea in the first place, and the advertisements in the second," said Sir Charles quickly. "But it can get on very well without Christie. He ought to write his book, and we must have the first refusal."

"Perhaps I'd better see him," began Ferguson.

"No, I'll see him myself," said the other. "I'll find out how he stands with regard to money. Houghton tells me he lives at a quaint little shop in Drury Lane, on sharing terms with that grown-up imp of Satan—what's his name? —Millidew, who works for us."

"If we're going to publish the first books of all the promising young men who call at this office——" began Mr. Ferguson.

"If we had ignored all the promising young men in the past, Alick, there wouldn't be any office for anybody to call at!" interrupted his chief. "You can leave the Christie business to me. I'll look after it myself."

"Very good, but I hope the young man will not disappoint you."

Sir Charles laughed and began to open his neglected letters.

"Am I usually right or wrong in my judgment of men?" he said, as Mr. Ferguson laid his hand on the door.

"Well, Charlie," said the Scotchman very slowly and rather grudgingly, "I must confess you've always been right in the past, but you may be quite wrong in the future, for all that."

"Thraun deevil!" he muttered to himself, quietly, as he turned out of the room.

While Sir Charles Buckley was discussing Felix Christie with his manager, it happened that Sir Charles Buckley's younger son was discussing his private affairs with Felix Christie.

Joe had arrived at Drury Lane, according to his appointment of the previous evening, to ask the advice of his friend. He opened the conversation, as he generally opened

any private conversation, with criticism of his popular brother.

" Of course you think that Houghton is a model of all the virtues," he said ; " so does my father and all the members of my mother's family. My uncle, Sir Joseph, the shipbuilder, you know, says that he never met such a promising young fellow, and Uncle Phil thinks more of him than he does of his own son."

" If you're jealous of Houghton——" began Christie, going straight to the point.

" I'm not jealous of him," interrupted Joe pettishly. " I appreciate his good qualities, Chris. But he's so hard ! He's so confoundedly self-righteous. A man can't talk to him. A man doesn't want to be lectured and given strenuous advice. He wants a little sympathy. If he's done anything foolish, he doesn't want to be bullied. In short, if he finds himself in a hole, what's the good of swearing and telling him it's his own fault ? A man knows that."

Rightly supposing that Joe was the man in question, Christie asked him to explain the nature of the hole into which the man had dropped and from which he required extricating.

He liked Joe, but not so much as Houghton, for the boy had none of his brother's personal attraction. He was still so young and undeveloped, but Christie could trace a certain resemblance to the head of Buckley's in his features and manner. It passed through his mind that Houghton was the son of Charles Buckley's energy and ambition, and Joe the son of his moods and pessimism.

" Of course it's a girl ! " said Joe suddenly, after evading direct questions and indulging in further disparagement of his brother's lack of sympathy.

Christie glanced involuntarily at his Pearl's photograph. It was always a girl !

" Well, who is she ? " he asked.

Joe's expression did not suggest the happy lover. Chris-

tie had a feeling that the matter was not so serious as he had anticipated.

"I'd rather tell you all about it, Chris," said his visitor. "You can judge for yourself if I'm so very much to blame. It began at a charity concert at Lady Wilton's—she and my mother are as thick as thieves, you know—and directly I saw her I was charmed. No, not exactly charmed, but captivated and surprised. She's so different from the ordinary sort."

"Are you speaking of Lady Wilton?" asked Christie, with a smile.

"My dear chap! Lady Wilton! A man doesn't fall in love with his grandmother," said Joe. "I'm speaking of Euterpe Chippett, of course."

"What is her name?" cried Christie.

"Euterpe Chippett," repeated Joe. "She's the second daughter of the Chippett family. Have you heard of them? They're all awfully clever. They give entertainments. Euterpe dances divinely! Not ordinary ballet dancing, you know, but in the classical style with lots of drapery and slow music. Mrs. Chippett taught her. She's a wonderful woman, but how I hate her! I loathe her, Chris!"

"Never mind Euterpe's mother. Tell me about the girl," said Christie.

"Well, I confess I was fascinated," he continued. "I stood against the wall in Lady Wilton's little drawing-room, jammed in, and Euterpe was dancing quite close to me the whole time. It was very difficult, for there was such a crowd she could hardly move her arms. It was abominably hot, and I noticed that she looked faint, so directly she had finished I managed to open one of the big windows and took her out on the balcony. She ate four ices. We stopped there for ever so long. She was dressed in a green robe, I suppose it was Greek, with gold bands in her hair. She has glorious hair, Chris, as black as night!"

He smiled for the first time, and relapsed into a reverie over Miss Euterpe Chippett's glorious hair.

"What did you talk about?" asked Christie bluntly.

"Oh, I don't know!" exclaimed Joe. "What does a man talk about to a pretty girl? I told her that she danced like a Greek goddess."

Christie burst out laughing.

"I don't see anything funny in that," said Joe. "You've never seen a Greek goddess dance yourself, have you?"

"I beg your pardon, Joe. Go on!"

"Well, I found out that she lived in Brompton, and before we parted—I'm sure I can't tell you exactly how it happened—she had promised to meet me in Hyde Park on the following afternoon."

"Did she keep the promise?"

Joe smiled.

"We sat under the trees for ever so long, and had tea—you know, Chris!—and I told her all about Henley. My people had a house-boat for the Regatta week. Euterpe had never been on the river. Poor little girl! I made her promise to go with me."

"Did she keep that promise too?" asked Christie.

"She always keeps her promises," said Joe, gravely.

"Did the Chippett family know she was going out with you on the river?"

"No! We didn't exactly agree to keep it to ourselves, but I didn't happen to mention it at home, and neither did she. Why should we? What was the harm? I thought the Chippetts were not like the people in our set, stuffed full of conventional rubbish. They seemed to be thorough Bohemians. Euterpe enjoyed herself immensely. We went to matinées together, and Richmond, and the Military Tournament, and the Exhibition—heaps of places—and I did her as well as I possibly could. It was all right, Chris. She is the dearest, most simple little girl you can imagine; not a bit talkative, just a little mouse."

"Well? Go on!" said Christie, as Joe went into another reverie on the little mouse.

"Well, we hadn't seen anything of each other for several

weeks, for I've been going with Houghton to the Pargetters so much lately, but I'd written to Euterpe once or twice, although she never writes to me. Last Monday, to my intense surprise, I got a letter from Mrs. Chippett asking me to go to their house. I didn't like to refuse, though I don't care about the rest of the family.

"Mrs. Chippett received me with open arms. What do you think she said? You'll never guess. She said I was engaged to be married to her darling Euterpe, and Mr. Chippett, who was away at Brighton with the eldest daughter, had sent us his blessing and best wishes on a picture post card!"

"My dear Joe! Had you proposed to the girl? Had she accepted you?"

"Not in so many words—no!" answered the troubled lover. "Of course, I'd said and written a great many things I didn't exactly mean. A man always does! It was an awful situation! What could I do? Mrs. Chippett is so overwhelming. She's a little woman, Chris, but she seems to use up all the air in a room and touch the ceiling."

"But what did the girl say?" asked Christie.

"Floods of tears!" groaned Joe, clutching at his hair in the misery of recollection. "She hardly said a word. They are all afraid of their mother. I'm afraid of her myself. I sat there, shuddering, while she scolded us both for keeping our secret from our fond parents. Imagine the feelings of *my* fond parents, Chris, when I announce my engagement to Miss Euterpe Chippett! I don't believe Euterpe really loves me any more than I love her, but her mother has talked her into it."

"Why didn't you speak the truth boldly at the time?" said Christie.

"Because I was a coward and an ass!" said Joe. "I couldn't bear to see Euterpe sobbing and crying, and when Mrs. Chippett asked me if my intentions were honourable, what could I say? I felt like a man in a melodrama, Chris. I never had any 'intentions.' We were just friends. We

understood each other perfectly, Euterpe and I, and I don't believe she would have made herself unhappy over me for a minute if Mrs. Chippett had let her alone. She was engaged once before—she told me so herself—but her mother broke it off."

"What a terrible person she must be," said Christie, with a smile.

"She's a——" Joe hesitated, searching for a word. "She's a vampire, Chris!"

"I suppose she knows all about you?" said Christie.

"Of course she does. She knows that my father is a very rich man."

"What are you going to do? The woman can't force you to marry her daughter, especially if the girl doesn't love you."

"No, but she can get me into a row with my people."

"Why not make a clean breast of it to your father?" said Christie. "Tell him the whole truth and ask him to help you."

"Not for a thousand pounds!" exclaimed Joe. "You don't know my father. He would think me a young fool, and he hates a fool."

"I think you are mistaken in him."

Joe laughed.

"I wish you knew him as well as I do. No, Chris! I would rather go to Houghton than to my father."

"You must appeal to the girl."

"Poor little brown eyes! How can I tell her I don't want her? What would she think of me? Oh no, Chris, I won't play it as low down as that."

"It would be infinitely worse to marry her without love."

"I'm not going to marry her!" cried Joe, angrily. "But I can't tell her so. I must get out of it—some other way. It is she who must break it off—and you must help us."

"What can I do, Joe?"

Joe bent forward and laid his hand on his friend's knee. His face was intensely serious.

"I ask a great favour," he said. "I know I ask more than many a man would dare to ask of another; but I ask you, Chris, to go to see Mrs. Chippett!"

"Is that all?" said Christie in a tone of relief. "Certainly! But what am I to say when I get there?"

"I'll coach you," said Joe. "I'll tell you, in a few words, every point to lay before her."

He drew his chair close to Christie and began the lesson. It took him over an hour to say the few words, to which his friend listened somewhat absent-mindedly, with his eyes frequently wandering to Pearl's photograph.

On the following afternoon, with high courage and a note of introduction, Christie set out to his encounter with the dread Mrs. Chippett.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CHIPPETT FAMILY

FELIX CHRISTIE found that the road in Brompton, where the Chippett family lived, was very long, very dusty, and generally gave an impression of having seen better days.

There were steep flights of steps leading to the front doors, and " Furnished Apartments " cards in the majority of first-floor windows.

He referred to the envelope of Joe Buckley's letter. It was addressed to Mrs. Theodore Chippett, " Ye Lair," followed by the name of the street, but no number ; he had been told, however, the whereabouts of Ye Lair, and was able to walk some distance along the pavement before examining the names that supplemented the numbers of the houses.

It was a dreary street. There were children playing on some of the doorsteps, a couple of dust-carts slowly creeping along, collecting dust from the houses, and two hawkers with a barrow, shouting in a hoarse duet words that were quite unintelligible.

Nearly all the houses possessed imposing names, such as Melrose, Strathearn, Invercloyd, or Chieveley, with occasional lapses into a more homely style with Wee Nestie and The Lilac Bush.

The dustman and Christie arrived at Ye Lair at the same minute, the former announcing his advent with the hoarse cry of his tribe and disappearing down a little paved walk at the side of the house, the latter mounting the flight of steps to ring the front-door bell.

He was about to do so when his eye fell on a small card, fastened under the knocker, and, stooping to examine it with some difficulty, for it was blotted and the handwriting somewhat illegible, he read : " Warning ! This portico is not safe. It is under repair, but may fall at any minute. Please go to side entrance."

With one glance at the weather-stained brickwork over his head, it is needless to say that Christie went down the steps with more alacrity than he had mounted them, and followed the trail of the dustman to the other entrance.

The side door was open, showing a kitchen in the foreground and a glimpse of garden beyond, gay with dandelions, and with a giant swing for children, like a gallows, in the middle of a plot of long, uncut grass.

There was no one in sight, so Christie rapped with his knuckles. A child of about eight answered the summons, he did not know whether boy or girl, with a mat of roughly-cropped hair, and a great display of thin legs in brown stockings beneath its outgrown green serge smock.

Rightly conjecturing that this was a young Chippett, Christie introduced himself as a friend of Mr. Buckley's and asked to see his—or her—mother.

" Oh, do come in ! " said the child, with an ease and cordiality that solved the sex problem—it was a girl. " I'll tell mummy you're here. Our portico is being repaired, but I hope you won't mind coming up the kitchen stairs. This way, please."

Christie groped his way along a dark passage, colliding with the retreating dustman, and followed the brown stockings up a dark flight of stairs.

" I'm awfully sorry if you've got dusty," said the child volubly. " But the dust carts *will* come in the afternoon just when we have callers. It's very annoying, isn't it ? Mummy wrote to the Vestry, but they were awfully rude. They said that the men couldn't be everywhere by nine o'clock in the morning. Come in, please. Don't take any

notice of the dog. He's only a puppy, so he's rather wild. Won't you sit down? I'll tell mummy."

Removing a hat and jacket from an arm-chair for the visitor to be seated, the child left him alone, carefully closing the door behind her.

It was not easy to follow her advice by taking no notice of the dog, for his yelps and barks had been deafening at the approaching footsteps of a stranger, and when Christie stood up to discover his whereabouts his excitement reached to frenzy.

He was a big Welsh terrier, tied to the leg of a sofa that he managed to drag several feet over the carpet in his struggle for freedom, nearly hanging himself in the attempt.

Christie advanced to meet him, not at all disturbed by this unnecessary display of hostility, and the dog, after much snuffing, leaping, and worrying, came to the conclusion that here was a friend, although he still yelped piercingly at intervals and dragged at the sofa-leg.

There were long bead curtains hanging between the two rooms, which were crowded with furniture, growing plants in china pots, ornaments, books, photographs, and musical instruments, everything powdered with dust.

In the back room, evidently used for a dining-room, were the remains of a meal. The quantities of flowers, some in vases, some in glass jam-jars, would have been more pleasant to look upon if the dead bunches had been removed from the living.

There were strange garments spread out on the backs of chairs, including a black satin spangled robe, a little fancy waistcoat and a pair of breeches, and a red cloak embroidered with an Irish harp in green wool.

A troop of shoes stood in a line in front of the empty grate, mobilized as it were for a general's inspection, starting with two large, bumpy pairs belonging to the head of the family, and ending with the small brown sandals of the youngest member.

There was a canary cage hanging in one window, the bird

singing shrilly, and a glass tank stood in the other, in which several fish were swimming about in murky water. Baskets of fancy straw, containing more or less dead ferns and adorned with bows of ribbon, told the tale of floral tributes to the family in the past.

Christie spent ten minutes in observing these things and making friends with the dog. Then the door burst open, and he found himself, almost before he had time to rise to his feet, exchanging a warm and prolonged handshake with the lady of the house.

"I am so sorry to have kept you waiting!" she exclaimed, emphasizing every other word. "How do you do? Pray be seated! Not that uncomfortable chair! We are having the springs repaired. Please! Please!"

Yielding to this entreaty, he accepted an arm-chair, Mrs. Chippett having placed the little satin garments on the piano before he could do so. She then perched herself on the music-stool and proceeded to open Joe Buckley's letter of introduction, giving the visitor an opportunity to add details to his first impression of a touzled head, a peculiarly soft hand, and a green smock very like the child's on a larger scale.

Mrs. Chippett was short and square in figure; brown-haired by nature, auburn by art; her big face was smooth and kindly, but so indefinite in shape that it might have been run out of a mould a few minutes too soon, just before the features were firmly set. Her dress was cut square at the neck, edged with faded gold braid. She wore a great many rings, and a tight string of cornelian beads, that looked like marbles, round her throat.

The child in brown stockings, who had been improving her knowledge of the visitor through the crack of the door, entered the room during Mrs. Chippett's perusal of Joe's letter and sat on her mother's knee.

"Dear Joe!" exclaimed Mrs. Chippett, passing the letter on to the child, who was much too big to be nursed and almost concealed her mother altogether. "What a

dear, good fellow he is! Quite a heart of gold. I'm sure I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Christie. This is my baby, Audrey. Go and shake hands with Mr. Christie, darling."

So Audrey and Mr. Christie shook hands, ignoring the incident of the kitchen stairs and the dustman.

"Isn't she large?" said Mrs. Chippett, again lugging her baby on to her knee. "Audrey takes after my husband's family. Giants, Mr. Christie; positive giants! Mr. Chippett is a very large man. Dearie, get dad's photograph out of the next room. I can't introduce him to you in person, as he is fulfilling a professional engagement with our eldest girl at Brighton, but you must see Euterpe. Dear Joe says that you want to have a chat about Euterpe. There! What do you think of Mr. Chippett?"

Christie gazed at the photograph thrust into his hand with suitable interest. Mr. Chippett was undoubtedly a large man, especially about the brow and chin. He was searching for words to express his admiration of these points when his hostess saved him the trouble.

"Did you ever see such a dome of thought, Mr. Christie? Did you ever see such a jaw? Massive, are they not? Concrete! Impenetrable!"

Christie murmured his acquiescence. He was very favourably impressed with Mrs. Chippett.

"Theodore Chippett is an elocutionist," she continued more slowly, as if the visitor were taking down her words for publication. "He is also a Shakespearean student and a lecturer on English literature. He went on the boards in his early days, but the modern stage does not afford opportunities for a man of his overwhelming personality."

"Can you explain the reason?" asked Christie.

The lady pondered, caressing Audrey's hair with one hand and pulling the dog's ears gently with the other.

"I think the chief difficulty lies in the necessity of compression," she answered. "Shall we take a Shakespearean tragedy as a case in point?"

" Suppose we do," said Christie, as she paused, evidently for a reply.

" Let us take ' Othello,' " Mrs. Chippett went on. " It is a play of singularly fine opportunities for an elocutionist, but it is impossible to do full justice to those opportunities on the stage. The part of Iago interferes, Desdemona interferes, Cassio interferes, and then a certain time has to be devoted to setting the scenes and allowing the minor characters to speak their lines, so that ' Othello ' *must* be cut, and Mr. Chippett is too earnest a student to tolerate such an indignity. The same objections apply to ' Hamlet,' or ' Coriolanus,' or ' Richard the Third.' "

Christie inquired whether Mr. Chippett, on the elocutionary platform, was not also obliged to use the blue pencil.

" I anticipated your question," replied the lady. " Of course Mr. Chippett has to cut, but he has the compensation of representing all the other characters as well as his own."

" Dad never recites Shakespeare, mummy," put in the child.

" Alas ! Very rarely," admitted her mother. " The public taste has sadly deteriorated of late years, Mr. Christie. All modern forms of entertainment are flippant and trivial. Who cares for recitations ? I mean recitations of the good, old-fashioned, sterling quality ? It was very different in Mr. Chippett's young days, when the audiences revelled in elocutionary efforts, and he used to rattle off such pieces as ' The Dream of Eugene Aram,' or ' How Horatius kept the Bridge,' as mere encores."

Christie glanced at the dome of thought in the photograph, inwardly rejoicing that he had not lived in Mr. Chippett's young days.

" However, it is no good grieving over past troubles," said his hostess, rising to place the photograph on the mantelpiece. " Our children endeavour to carry on the old artistic traditions in an up-to-date form. We are all

musical, Mr. Christie, with the exception of my eldest son, Edgar, who does not share his father's objections to the stage, so is devoting his talents to that branch of the profession. He is touring at present with a highly successful melodrama. Audrey, fetch one of Eddy's frames from the study."

The child departed, ran downstairs, and stumbled up again with a big frame of photographs, representing a young man of very youthful and amiable appearance in the characters of a Roman warrior, a bloodthirsty peasant of the French Revolution, and a white-haired butler.

"Edgar has been most fortunate," said Mrs. Chippett proudly. "He has never been out of an engagement from the day when he first 'walked on.' Such a dear boy, so devoted to us all!"

Her voice was so unexpectedly gentle as she spoke of her son that Christie felt, not for the first time, that she was far from the heartless and mercenary woman Joe Buckley imagined. He was emboldened to speak at once on the vital subject.

"I wish you would tell me something about Miss Euterpe, Mrs. Chippett."

She pushed the big child off her knee and looked at her visitor shrewdly, pondering his apparently simple words.

"I suppose you know she is engaged to dear Joe, Mr. Christie? Or did not dear Joe mention the fact?"

"Oh yes. He told me of their engagement, Mrs Chippett."

She looked gratified.

"It has been a most extraordinary affair. Love at first sight on both sides," she went on. "At first Mr. Chippett was inclined to blame the young people for keeping their secret so well. If it hadn't been for a friend of Euterpe's happening to mention she had seen them together once or twice, we should have been in the dark to this hour."

"I think Joe Buckley was very much to blame," said Christie, decidedly. "I told him so."

"So romantic and charming!" murmured Mrs. Chippett.

"So clandestine and sentimental!" exclaimed Christie.

Mrs. Chippett looked surprised, then indignant. Christie braced himself for a skirmish.

"You're a very young man to scoff at first love," she said.

"I am not doing so."

"Indeed?"

"It was certainly not first love on Joe Buckley's part," said Christie. "A young fellow of Joe's temperament falls in and out of love several times in a season."

"Do you mean to imply that your friend is a heartless deceiver, a ruthless destroyer of young illusions, and a wrecker of happy homes?" cried Mrs. Chippett, expressing herself in the language of the highly successful melodrama in which her son Edgar was engaged.

"Nothing of the kind, Mrs. Chippett," said Christie. "But I mean to suggest that a boy-and-girl love affair is not the serious, till-death-do-us-part contract that cannot be broken off by mutual consent."

"If you came here for the purpose of doing your friend's dirty work, Mr. Christie——" began Mrs. Chippett, rising to her feet with the intention of ordering him out of the house, but checked in the middle of her sentence by the flash of anger her words provoked. It lasted for only a second, and then Christie smiled with the appealing, frank expression on his face that few could resist.

"My dear Mrs. Chippett, don't be annoyed with me!" he said. "I only want to be a good friend to young Buckley, whom I know so well, and to your daughter, whom I hope to know. I have nothing to gain by my interference—I hate interfering—but I couldn't refuse Joe. That's the whole truth. Joe and his brother mean so much to me. You see, I have no brothers or sisters of my own. My mother is in Canada. Be patient with me! Be kind! I know how patient and how kind a woman can be."

Christie was sincere, but he knew perfectly well that such

a speech as this, spoken in a voice that shook a little, would accord with Mrs. Chippett's dramatic sense. The round, curious eyes of the overgrown child alone saved him from wild exaggeration, for occasionally his love of the ridiculous overcame his prudence, and he was seized at this minute with a desire to go down on one knee and entreat Mrs. Chippett to be—not a mother, that would never do—an elder sister to him.

He saw that Joe Buckley had made the fatal mistake of taking the dread Mrs. Chippett too seriously, being frightened of her, and not perceiving that her love for her children was really greater than her worldly ambition.

"I was about to request you never to darken these doors again, Mr. Christie," she said, resuming her seat, "but I perceive that I was too hasty. You have not appealed to me in vain. A mental picture of our Edgar, alone in a foreign land, flashed through my mind when you spoke of your own state. I am deeply sorry for you."

She extended her hand, and Christie ("playing up to her," as Edgar would have said) kissed it with all due ceremony.

"Audrey darling," said Mrs. Chippett, detecting an inclination to grin on the countenance of her daughter, "will you see if Euterpe has come in, and order tea?"

"Now let us be serious and business-like, Mr. Christie," she continued, when the child had retired and was heard shouting "Terp!" outside the door. "Mr. Buckley has acknowledged his engagement to my little girl. She is greatly attached to him. It would be a suitable marriage in every way. They are both young. She has beauty and genius, he has position and wealth."

"I can't let you have the last word," said Christie. "Joe is entirely dependent on his father and mother. He does not possess wealth. He has no money of his own. If they chose to turn him out of the house he would be penniless."

"That is a contingency we need not discuss," said Mrs.

Chippett. "I understand that Sir Charles and Lady Buckley are devoted to their boys."

"Quite true," said Christie. "But if Joe were to displease them by marrying a girl, however charming and beautiful, of whom they did not approve——"

"Stop!" interrupted the lady sternly, with upraised hand. "It would be absurd for anybody to disapprove of the daughter of such a man as Theodore Chippett. The idea is unthinkable."

"Is it not equally unthinkable for the daughter of Theodore Chippett being subjected to the possibility of disapproval?" asked Christie, slightly involved, but with impressive earnestness.

"You are quite right," said Mrs. Chippett. "It is a point that was raised by Mr. Chippett himself. 'I would never brook patronage,' were his exact words; 'I could not bend the knee to secure my daughter a coronet!' Professionally, Mr. Chippett has often solicited patronage, but privately—never!"

"Surely you feel the force of the argument?" said Christie, following up his advantage.

"I do not think it applies to Joe Buckley," she replied. "As I pointed out to my husband, he will not inherit a coronet. His father is only a baronet, and Joe is a younger son. Then, again, how many of our nobility have married ladies on the actual stage, and Euterpe has only appeared on the entertainment platform. I taught her to dance myself, and if we give performances on the piers at seaside resorts during the summer, what of that? Didn't Mrs. Siddons play Juliet in a barn?"

The effect of this lofty speech was somewhat marred by the sound of scuffling outside the door, followed by the entrance of Audrey and her two young brothers, hot from the fray.

"These are my two other sons, Mr. Christie," said Mrs. Chippett. "This is Clarence, who plays the banjo, mandolin, guitar, and xylophone, and this is Leonard, the Boy Bass."

Clarence was a tall, good-looking lad, with his hair cropped in a fringe, like his sister, and a general appearance of outgrowing his clothes. The Boy Bass had inherited the big forehead and chin of his father combined with the small nose of his mother, so that the middle of his face had a peculiar effect of being hidden away. They both wore suits of faded corduroy velvet, originally purchased for professional purposes.

"Is tea on the way, baby?" asked Mrs. Chippett, after the young gentlemen had shaken hands with the visitor and retired, to finish their squabble, to the back room.

"Yes, mummy; Terp is getting it ready," replied the little girl.

"Our domestic assistant left us rather hurriedly yesterday," explained the hostess. "So Euterpe has assumed control. We make no stranger of you, Mr. Christie. As Mr. Chippett says—he is a coiner of striking and original phrases—Ye Lair is really Liberty Hall."

At this minute Miss Euterpe announced herself by bumping the tray against the door as a signal for her sister to open it.

Christie looked for her entrance with interest and curiosity. He saw at once that she was a very pretty girl, a great improvement on the rest of the family, although little Audrey possessed the same beautiful, dark eyes.

He jumped to his feet to relieve her of the tea-tray, and surprised a look of sullen resentment and ill-temper on her pale face. She thanked him ungraciously, and proceeded to arrange the cups and saucers, after removing the remains of the former meal from the table.

"Mr. Christie is a friend of dear Joe, Euterpe," said Mrs. Chippett.

"Really!" said Euterpe, giving the visitor a second glance, but without any change in her expression.

"Why don't you ask him if he has brought any message?" continued her mother, archly.

" Because I'm sure that he hasn't ! " returned the girl.

They sat down to the tea-table, after some preliminary agitation over the lack of milk, followed by a disagreement between the two boys as to whose turn it was to run an errand.

It seemed to Christie, until the meal began, that Euterpe had cut enough bread and butter for a school treat, but after watching the operations of Clarence and the Boy Bass, he perceived that she had not over-estimated the quantity required. The whole family appeared to be ravenously hungry, and Mrs. Chippett frequently replenished the big brown teapot from a kettle of hot water which she kept on the floor beside her chair. The piles of bread and butter were supplemented by two kinds of cake, also cut into thick slices by Euterpe, a three-pound pot of apple and blackberry jam, and a wilderness of watercress, dotted with radishes.

The conversation during tea turned on the professional experiences of the family, anecdotes of Edgar, and a long lament from Mrs. Chippett on the difficulty of enticing money into artistic pockets.

Joe Buckley was not mentioned again. Euterpe did not speak, except to issue such orders as : " Audrey, pass the jam ! " or " Leo, do you want any more bread and butter ? Look ahead ! " or " Stir up the pot, mummy ; the kid wants another cup."

She was good-tempered to the children, but her habitual expression was sulky and discontented. He noticed that she was dressed, unlike her mother and little sister, in a well-cut frock, very neat and dainty. Once, when Mrs. Chippett was eloquent on the subject of classic dancing, he heard her muttering : " Bosh ! Stuff ! Rot ! Rubbish ! " under her breath.

Christie, with his real object still in abeyance, accepted an invitation to prolong his visit, hoping for an opportunity of pursuing the subject of the engagement with Mrs. Chippett.

His vague hopes of a private conversation with Euterpe were unexpectedly realized, but not until he had listened to half a dozen selections on the xylophone by Clarence, a long solo from the Boy Bass, whose voice seemed to proceed from the cellar, and such life-like imitations of a farmyard by Audrey that the dog tied to the sofa-leg was moved to add dismal howling to the young lady's efforts.

Christie was still applauding the farmyard when there was a loud battering at the side door. Euterpe left the room to answer it, the curiosity of the younger members inducing them to shout at one another, their mother and visitor to "Shut up!"

Euterpe returned, after a few minutes, and whispered in her mother's ear.

"Good gracious! How delightful! It is a gentleman who has called in regard to lessons in elocution from my husband," explained Mrs. Chippett.

Christie offered to go at once.

"Not at all! Be seated, I beg," returned his hostess. "Euterpe has shown him into Mr. Chippett's study in the basement. Will you excuse me for a few moments? This gentleman has been hanging in the balance, if I may use such an expression, for some weeks. Mr. Chippett had almost relinquished the hope of receiving him as a pupil. He is engaged in commercial pursuits, which accounts for his calling at this unconventional hour. Mr. Chippett will be most gratified. Will you pardon me—ten minutes at the outside."

Christie entreated her not to hesitate for a second, and she accordingly hurried away to interview the elocutionary aspirant waiting in the basement. It was not long before Clarence, Leonard, and Audrey were summoned to be introduced to the future pupil, and shortly afterwards, judging by the distant sounds, he was being entertained with the xylophone, bass songs, and farmyard.

"Poor old dad!" said Euterpe as the door closed on her brothers and sister. "He'll be so pleased to give these

lessons. He isn't cheerful and hopeful, like mummy. He gets so depressed."

"You are a very talented family," said Christie, who was making up his mind how to broach the subject of her engagement.

"Glad you think so!" rejoined the girl, the look of affection with which she had spoken of her father changing into her usual frown.

There was an awkward pause.

"Miss Euterpe!" said Christie, with sudden determination. "I want to talk to you about Joe Buckley."

Her olive cheek showed a tinge of colour. She assumed an air of cool indifference.

"I can't imagine what you have to say," she answered.

"It is very difficult to begin," acknowledged Christie. "Won't you help me?"

"How can I do that?" with a quick glance and her colour deepening. "I doubt whether it is right of me to discuss our engagement, or very kind of you to suggest it."

"Give me the benefit of the doubt!" said Christie. "Joe has told me that you are both—rather unhappy—not such good friends as you were in the past, or hope to be in the future."

"If Mr. Buckley chooses to abuse me behind my back——" she began, with temper.

"He has done nothing of the kind," Christie interrupted.

"Well, what have you got to do with it?" she cried. "Why have you come here? Joe sent you! Of course he sent you. It's all very well to write letters"—she pulled a letter out of her pocket—"but I don't want him! He has made a fool of me. It's a shame! There! There! I hate his stupid old letters!"

She tore the sheet of paper into little bits as she spoke, threw them on the floor and stamped upon them.

Christie, who would doubtless have been greatly impressed if Pearl Henning had been the heroine of the little scene, could hardly forbear a laugh at her childishness.

He felt inclined to shake her, but stooped down instead and picked up the pieces.

"Oh, you needn't do that!" said Euterpe, sitting down again and folding her arms. "We're all untidy in this house. Mother wouldn't notice them. Thank you all the same."

"Not at all!" said Christie, in cheerful acknowledgment of her ungracious thanks. "Now let us talk sensibly. I'm sure you're a sensible little girl. Joe isn't sensible. Joe's a coward, Miss Chippett; he's an arrant coward."

"Why?" cried the girl in surprise.

"He's afraid to ask you a straight question—afraid of your mother—afraid of breaking your heart!"

"He needn't flatter himself he could do that!" she exclaimed. "What is the straight question he is afraid to ask me?"

Even Christie hesitated a second before replying, then he took his courage in both hands.

"Do you really love him, Miss Euterpe?"

He expected a quick retort, perhaps a burst of tears or wild protestations, but the seriousness of the question seemed to banish her anger. She answered it by asking another, looking earnestly into his face.

"Does he really love me? That's the point!"

Christie was silent, pondering his reply. She suddenly gave a little laugh, and he saw that she could look captivating.

"I do pity you!" she exclaimed. "You've had to listen to mummy all the afternoon, and now you're let in for a scene with me! It's too bad of Joe. You're quite right in saying he's afraid of mummy. We're all afraid of her. Are you?"

"Not in the least."

"Then ask her if we may have another talk. Do you dare?"

"Certainly, if you'll promise not to be so angry next time, Miss Euterpe. You frightened me."

"I don't believe anything in the world would frighten you, Mr. Christie."

The girl looked at him with such genuine kindness and admiration that he quite forgot having thought her sullen or disagreeable. They were friends from that minute, but before another word could pass between them the door burst open and the children rushed into the room.

"It's settled, Terp!" cried Audrey. "He's going to take the full course. 'Hoo-roar, Pott!'"

"'Hoo-roar, Pott!'" echoed Clarence. "He thinks he might like to try the xylophone later on."

"He says my chest notes are like an organ," added the Boy Bass.

"Most satisfactory in every way!" announced their mother, following them more slowly. "He is a gentleman who will appeal most strongly to Mr. Chippett—quiet, dignified, without a ghost of a smile. Mr. Chippett abhors flippancy."

"I contratulate you on the success of the visit," said Christie.

"Many thanks!" returned his hostess. "How often have I observed, Euterpe, that things at the worst will turn? It is incredible that artistic pockets are always to be empty. Justice and common sense alike forbid it. The world may be slow to appreciate true merit, but give it time, be patient, practise, keep up your répertoire, and all will be well in the end!"

The younger Chippetts, resenting this improvement of the occasion, released the dog and retired again to the basement, where they evidently amused themselves by jumping over the furniture and throwing about the kitchen utensils.

It was a happy moment for Christie to prove his courage, so he boldly asked Mrs. Chippett to let him have a private interview with Euterpe.

Mrs. Chippett remembered the flash in his eyes when she tried to insult him. She had met her match, and, after the manner of the brave, respected him for his daring.

"Certainly, Mr. Christie! I am sure Euterpe will be overjoyed to receive you," she said in a tone of affability that would have astounded Joe Buckley. "When will you honour us with another call? My eldest daughter and her father return to town on Saturday night. Shall we say Sunday? Do you expect dear Joe on Sunday, my sweet Euterpe?"

"No, I don't!" snapped her sweet Euterpe.

Christie made a hasty resolution to postpone a visit to Pearl, and said he would be delighted. Perhaps, he hinted, if he called at an early hour, Miss Euterpe would allow him to take her—he hesitated for a suitable place, and Mrs. Chippett finished the sentence for him.

"Say the Natural History Museum! A favourite haunt of all our children, Mr. Christie. They prefer the Zoological Gardens, but it is rather inaccessible from this part of London, and there are other reasons why we pay more frequent visits to the Museum."

"It's free!" said Euterpe bluntly.

Christie said, for the second time, that he would be delighted, and thought it was as well to go while the tide of Mrs. Chippett's favour was in full flood.

The three children leapt out from dark corners as he descended the stairs, Euterpe having repeated the formula, "We are having the portico repaired," and bade him a most affectionate farewell.

Some little excitement was added to his departure by the escape of the dog, who tore down the middle of the road, hotly pursued, and ultimately captured three streets away, by Clarence, the Boy Bass, and Audrey, while Mrs. Chippett and her older daughter whistled and shouted from the edge of the pavement.

Christie, very well pleased with his visit, turned his steps in the direction of Hyde Park, determined to spend an hour in the restful, shadowy companionship of the people in his novel.

He had written the two opening chapters, and was

beginning to experience the inner excitement and absorption that takes possession of a writer, whether he will or no, during the first months of the development of his work.

Choosing a quiet, shady path and wandering aimlessly along, he weaved everything about him—the trees, the waving grass, the children in the distance—into the bright fabric of his imagination.

The hour was late when he reached Drury Lane.

Millidew was standing outside their shop, his hands deep in his pockets, an unlit cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, his lank black hair dragged down over his eyes. A picture of abject misery !

" Ned ! What's the matter ? " asked Christie.

" At last ! I thought you were never coming back ! " exclaimed his friend, in a voice that showed anger and impatience had sunk into despair.

" Good Lord ! What is it ? "

Millidew did not answer, but he jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the closed door of the shop.

Christie, without hesitating for another second, thrust it open and went in.

Sitting bolt upright in the middle of the room, surrounded by boxes and packages, he beheld –his mother.

CHAPTER XX

ETTIE, MRS. CHRISTIE, AND EUTERPE

THERE are some emotions in life of so subtle and secret a nature, so interwoven with the most delicate sensations of youth, that the writer of novels should approach them with great diffidence. They may be lightly handled, it is true, for they provide the foundation of all stories of all times. They are as common as sunshine and storm—as the growth of wheat and the flowering of roses.

One of these emotions is the hidden love of a maid for a man.

That is to say, hidden in her own breast, and unsuspected by her nearest and dearest. There is no love that a woman gives to a man at once so passionate and so pure. It has gained nothing from Experience, lost nothing from Disillusion.

It is both humble and proud ; unselfish in every thought, and idealizes its object, but with the quick inner judgment unimpaired by the joy of requital.

Such a secret love Ettie Boscombe had long known for Felix Christie. It had become as much a part of her life as the air she breathed.

Always a self-controlled girl, accepting a second place as a matter of course, it was not until her friendship with the young Canadian had grown into a bond of more than usual affection and sympathy that she acknowledged to herself, or even realized, that he was a man whom she could love—whom she did love—with all her heart.

It was natural to Ettie to live, more or less, in a world

of her own, although circumstances had developed the practical side of her character.

Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have found her an ordinary, sensible, good-tempered, dear, uninteresting girl. The hundredth might have discovered that she possessed a quaint fancy, shy humour, and a certain softness and bloom—an indefinable youthfulness of outlook—that is a charm independent of age, or knowledge, or appearance.

Christie might have been the hundredth man if his eyes had not been dazzled, his mind confused, in the rush of sensuous delight and exaggerated estimate of her beauty with which he had been swept off his feet by Pearl Henning.

His affection for Ettie, so different from her love for him, had been undisturbed by the advent of Pearl. The possibility of a change in their relations never crossed his mind, for he had grown to rely upon her sympathy as if she were a particularly dear sister, whose fondness and interest would be utterly unchanged by his marriage or her own.

Ettie knew the plot of his book. She had read the chapters already written, wandering into that mysterious world of Felix Christie's imagination that was to extend so far, but of which the writer himself had only reached a few steps beyond the borderland.

To say that she thought of him continually will perhaps give a false impression of Ettie's secret, implying that she was both introspective and absorbed in her own affairs. As there were days when she did not speak his name, so there were days when her thoughts of him were like shadows in the background of her mind, merging into other shadows, but never to be confused with them.

She had long schooled herself not to listen for the step she could never mistake for another man's, or the voice that in its lightest tones quickened her heart-beats ; but whenever he came, or whenever she heard him, the effect was the same—a sense of delight, of strength, of realized hope.

Pearl was a woman to whom a man must adapt himself

or be wretched. Ettie was not only sympathetic, but capable of making him happy and at ease without any apparent effort.

Christie's visits to Ettie Boscombe were usually paid in an unconventional and characteristic manner. They would have scandalized Mr. Gambol and his sister; even Pearl, accustomed as she was becoming to her lover's eccentricity, would have been shocked to see him burst in upon her friend with:

"I say, Ettie! So-and-so has happened!" or "I've got something to tell you, Ettie!" without any preliminary ceremony of hand-shaking or remarks upon the weather.

He had even been guilty of paying Miss Boscombe a lengthy call without speaking a single word, except to say, "How are you, Ettie?" when he arrived, and "Farewell, Ettie!" when he went away.

It was not surprising, therefore, that shortly after Christie recovered from the shock of amazement at his mother's arrival in Drury Lane, he carried the news to Waterloo Road.

Ettie shared his surprise. They sat and stared at each other blankly for a few seconds, after he had announced the fact, then an amused twinkle came into Ettie's eyes and the expression of her mouth changed. Christie threw himself back in his chair with a loud laugh. She instantly became grave, but her eyes still twinkled.

"What are you laughing at?" she asked, with mock severity.

"For one of those reasons that can't be explained," he answered. "If you don't see the joke, my dear girl, I can't make you!"

"Perhaps I do see it."

"Imagine the scene," Christie went on. "There was my mother, sitting with all her portable property round her feet, and poor Ned outside on the pavement, waiting for me. She had scared him, Ettie, out of his mad wits. Ned was crushed—scattered all over the floor."

" Why has she come ? Why didn't she let you know ? " asked Ettie.

He threw up his arms and let them drop to his sides limply.

" Heaven only knows ! She says it is an old idea. She couldn't live any longer without seeing me. My mother is the most extraordinary woman. She—is—extraordinary ! "

" Then I suppose she greeted you with great affection ? " said Ettie.

" Not a bit of it ! " he exclaimed. " When I marched in, leaving Ned out in the street, she spoke to me for all the world as if we had parted three hours, instead of more than three years, ago. Hardly gave me a kiss, but began to talk about ' a pack of lazy fools, callin' themselves porters,' at the railway station. It was not until I bade her good night that she treated me at all differently from Ned."

" Was she loving to you then ? " asked Ettie.

" Yes, for a few minutes, in that strange, passionate way that I once described to you."

" Did she sleep at your place, Felix ? "

" Of course," he answered. " She's established herself in my room. I left her this morning cleaning the paint. I'm afraid Ned and I will be scrubbed and scoured out of our lives now, Ettie."

" Where did you sleep ? "

" Up in our attic."

" Oh, Felix ! How uncomfortable ! " she cried.

" Oh, I can manage very well," he assured her. " I feel a little bit like the top sardine in a box, even though I lie on the floor, and some people might object to throwing out the mattress before they could get into the bath ; but it will do for me all right enough. Ned says he wouldn't sleep up there for twenty pounds, but he's so fussy."

" Abominably selfish," observed Ettie, who had not studied the general arrangements at Drury Lane without forming a decided opinion about Christie's friend.

" Do you think so ? " said Christie, mildly. " Perhaps

you're right. Poor old Ned! One can forgive much to a man of his genius."

"It isn't genius at all," she rejoined, indignantly. "It is spurious talent. His work is cunning and ingenious, that's all. He deliberately aims low, turning his skilful hand to vulgar uses."

"All the more reason why we should be lenient with his faults, Ettie," said her companion. "He injures himself, not us, by what you call vulgar misuse of great gifts. Poor old Ned!"

"What does your mother say to him?"

"I think they will rub along quite smoothly, in spite of the unpromising opening of their friendship. I have already told my mother, very emphatically and solemnly, she must not interfere with Ned's part of the house. She would rather sit in her bedroom than behind the shop, so they will only meet at meals. She's a good cook, you know, and Ned appreciates good cookery."

"Is she going to stop in London? What are her plans for the future?"

"I wish I knew. She has locked up her house in Mapleville, but not sold it, so I conclude she means to go back. She seems to have been contemplating this surprise visit for months, but I wish she had let me know. I should have liked to give her a good reception. I don't know whether she will care about sight-seeing. What do you think?"

"I think that you mustn't neglect your work, Felix, whether she likes sight-seeing or not."

"Oh, that's all right! I shall get along excellently. I hope she'll like Drury Lane. I don't want to leave the Lane until——"

He said no more, but Ettie guessed the unspoken words—"Until I am married to Pearl."

Mrs. Christie's opinion of Drury Lane was not complimentary to that historic spot. She considered it "a musty pig-sty."

When Christie returned, much cheered by Ettie Bos-

combe, he found his mother engaged in cleaning the back windows.

"My dear mother! I can't allow you to do this kind of work," he protested, with something of the old nervous helplessness coming over him at the sight of her.

The sleeves of her black stuff dress were rolled above the elbow, and she wore a big, square apron, fringed with a border of crochet.

"I never could eat my meals with any relish, Felix, in a room with mucky windows," she answered.

"But Mrs. Towel will clean them all to-morrow morning, mother, or I'll do them to-night. You haven't come to London to be my servant," said Christie.

"Is your Mrs. Towel a widow woman?" asked his mother.

"Yes; her husband was killed in South Africa; at least he went to South Africa at the end of the war and never came back," said Christie, repeating the oft-told tale of their latest charwoman.

Mrs. Christie gave a grim smile.

"Your Mrs. Towel has been in the wars herself this mornin'," she said, significantly.

"What have you done to her, mother?"

"Sent her packin', Felix. My! She ran like a cat in the rain. I presoom the untidy slut had never struck a woman like me before. Her heels out of her stockin's, and yards of mournin' streaming down her back."

"I had remonstrated with her about those widow's weeds, mother, but she said the time wasn't up to leave them off, though her husband disappeared years ago. Mrs. Towel's a stickler for etiquette. But I'm glad you've got rid of her. She was rather a tyrant to Ned and me. I'm not going to allow you to do her work."

"How are you goin' to stop me, Felix?"

She dabbed the wash-leather back into the pail and dried her hands on a duster, looking at him curiously with the peculiar darkening of her face—the set, obstinate expression

—that had oppressed him in his childhood with a vague dread that he could not understand. The feeling that it awakened now was pity. It was no longer a home-keeping boy who looked at her, but a man of quickened emotions and rapidly developing knowledge of humanity.

"Mother!" he said, and crossed the room to put his arms round her strongly, regardless of her immediate effort to push him off. "Mother, I wouldn't attempt to coerce you, but I think there are times when you would do anything in the world for my sake, just to please me. Am I right?"

"Yes, now and then, but not always," she replied, with one of her hands on his shoulder, the other grasped in his.

"Let the times be more frequent, dear mother," he pleaded. "I never dared to speak to you like this at home, but you know I'm not a little fellow any longer. You and I understand each other better now."

"You will never understand me, Felix."

He laughed, rallying her.

"Are you such a riddle, mother?"

To his surprise she answered fiercely, but no longer trying to push him away.

"Yes, you've just spoken the truth! I'm a riddle to myself. I'm a wretched piece. What's the good of worryin' about it? I was born with an ugly temper, and I've acted ugly all my life. There's one consolation for you, Felix, that if I made you miserable at home, I made myself much worse."

"Mother, what is the trouble? Can't you be free and open with me? Let me try to help you."

She scrubbed her eyes with her handkerchief. The shadow seemed to lift, for a few minutes, from her brooding mind.

"We ought to be the best of friends," Christie went on, overjoyed at the change. "We are all alone in the world until I get married and we add Pearl to our small household—you'll love Pearl, mother!—and there is no reason

why we shouldn't be as happy as the days are short! After all, I'm your only son, and I'll make you proud of me before I've done."

He spoke the last words with a laugh, but Mrs. Christie's happy moment was over. She stuffed her handkerchief back into her pocket and stooped for her pail of water.

"I'll do as you wish, Felix, about the cleanin'," she said, with an effort. "But it's no good askin' me to con-verse. I never was struck on hearin' myself talk, or other people either."

Christie signalized his victory by carrying the pail into the back yard.

"What a strong boy you've grown," she said, looking at him with unwilling admiration as he lifted a big can of water in one hand. "I thought you was goin' to be a 'softy' when you took to playing the fiddle, but you've broadened out something wonderful."

"It must be the labour of wielding the pen," said Christie.

"Ah! If every man who could write packs o' nonsense grew tall and broad-shouldered, there wouldn't be so many whipper-snappers walkin' round," observed Mrs. Christie dryly.

Felix followed her into the sitting-room behind the shop. She looked oddly out of keeping with her surroundings. The big, black dog, shrinking past her, sprang up at his master.

"Why don't you chain that dog out in the yard?" she asked. "A great, overgrown, nasty, black bear!"

"He's the best-tempered old bear in London, aren't you, Neb?" said Christie. "It would break his heart to be chained up in our little yard, mother. Besides, I like his company. He's always something to look forward to."

"For the land's sake!" exclaimed his mother. "Whatever do you mean by that?"

"When one is away from home, or can't sleep at night, or longing for the silent tomb, as Mr. Toots said, the affection of a dog is something to look forward to. It never fails. I'm as sure of Neb as you are of heaven, mother."

"Now you're talkin' like a heathen idolater."

Christie smiled, and held his dog's head between his hands in a rough caress, while Neb's hazel eyes, bright and liquid, looked into his face with the love that speaks without words.

"Felix! Who is this?"

Mrs. Christie snapped out the question suddenly, pointing to one of the unframed photographs thrust into an ugly red plush case that Pearl had presented to him.

He rose and stooped over his mother's shoulder.

"The young fellow?" he questioned. "Oh, that's Joe Buckley. He's the son of Sir Charles Buckley, who is going to publish my book. This is his elder brother, Houghton. What do you think of them? Houghton's the best pal I've ever had, except Ned Millidew."

Mrs. Christie did not take the photographs into her own hands, but she looked at them closely, then turned her eyes on Felix and studied him for a minute with a curious interest, as if she were trying to read his thoughts.

Nothing had been farther from his mind, when he spoke of the Buckley brothers, than his own childhood, but suddenly he remembered an old, long-banished scene. It was night, and he saw himself, a little child, standing on a pile of stones peeping through the slit of open window into the Methodist chapel near his old home.

The people were singing a revivalist hymn, swaying backwards and forwards to the tune, and he saw his mother, with her bonnet pushed back from her dark hair, her lips moving, and her hands outspread upon her breast, absorbed in her silent, intense thoughts.

Surprised at the vividness of this mental picture, for had he been an artist he could have drawn every detail, Christie failed to discover the connecting link with anything he or his companion had said.

He glanced at his mother, wondering whether her expression had recalled the old vision, but there was nothing of the passionate girl of the chapel left in the severe woman.

"I guess I'll put on my bonnet," she said. "Then you can show me some of the sights; but I don't expect to enjoy myself in such a dirty place as London, so I give you fair warnin', Felix."

With these encouraging words she hurried out of the room, and Christie returned the photographs of Houghton and Joe Buckley to the red plush case, pondering over old memories.

His mother's prediction had been correct. She did not enjoy sight-seeing in the least, so many things in London comparing unfavourably, in her opinion, with the town of Mapleville.

Christie determined to press Ettie Boscombe into the service rather than Pearl, who was always abusing London, but highly resented it in other people.

Mrs. Christie disapproved of picture galleries and museums, considered theatres wicked, and thought such buildings as Westminster Abbey and the Tower musty and old-fashioned.

Ettie thought that the shops would interest her, but the bravest show in Regent Street or Piccadilly did not surpass, according to Mrs. Christie, a "Spring Opening" at the principal millinery emporium at Mapleville.

The churches, she confessed, were numerous and imposing, but she "didn't hold" with so many different doctrines.

Pearl did not make a favourable impression on Mrs. Christie, and the task of keeping the peace between them was added to Felix's many difficulties.

His mother's strong opinions on what she called "inconspicous dressin'" were opposed to Pearl's equally strong views on the subject. If big hats were the fashion, Miss Henning appeared in one of the dimensions of a cartwheel; if they became small, hers would shrink to the size of a teacup saucer. If short dresses were popular, Pearl's would be shorter by several inches than anybody else's,

but if they went to the other extreme, she would cheerfully sweep the pavements with her skirts.

"If it was the style to have your hair dyed blue, I presoom you wouldn't have the sense to keep it a natural colour," Mrs. Christie once said to her.

"No! I should have it a brighter blue than any other woman's!" promptly rejoined Miss Henning.

Christie often wondered, when he saw how much his mother disliked her surroundings, why she was determined to remain in England.

He did not fully understand her peculiar temperament, but he saw that she was changed. Time had made her a little more tolerant, a little more merciful to the sins and weaknesses of others. She was cold and stern, as of old, but now and then, when they were alone together, she would sit with her eyes fixed on Christie, her crochet forgotten, with an expression on her face he had never seen in his childhood. It was a curious, questioning expression, as if he puzzled her, but always changed at his smile into a tenderness of response to which she never gave words.

At first he had found it impossible to write with his mother in the room, but after a while he could work as freely as if he were alone. That gave her pleasure, but she did not know what an effort of concentration it cost him.

He did not forget, in his new responsibilities, the affairs of Joe Buckley, and paid his second visit to the Chippett family on the Sunday following their first meeting.

Leaving his mother to the care of Ettie Boscombe, Christie arrived at Ye Lair at the appointed hour.

Euterpe was waiting at the sitting-room window, and signalled him to go to the side entrance, the dangerous portico being still unrepaired. The house was very quiet, leading him to suppose, quite rightly, that the younger Chippetts were not at home.

Euterpe opened the door. Her bright yellow dress, a little extravagant in colour and design, was nevertheless

very effective and becoming. She wore a string of big amber beads and carried a Japanese sunshade.

"Mummy's kindest regards, Mr. Christie, and she hopes you'll come back to supper," said Euterpe as they left the house together. "Dad and Angela came home last night. Mummy is most anxious you should meet dad."

Christie expressed the pleasure with which he anticipated making the acquaintance of Mr. Chippett. The girl looked at him archly under the brim of her large hat. There was nothing sullen or ill-tempered about her expression to-day.

"How ceremonious we are!" she exclaimed.

"I feel the solemnity of the occasion, Miss Euterpe," he replied. "It is the first time I have had the honour of visiting a family of genius."

"I don't think you need be sarcastic," she snapped, with her usual frown.

"No, but really the Chippetts are very remarkable!" he defended himself. "Our mutual friend, Joe Buckley, tells me that you dance like a Greek goddess."

"Like a monkey-on-a-stick!" observed the young lady, as they passed through the entrance gates of the Natural History Museum. "If there is one thing I dislike more than another, Mr. Christie, it is solo dancing. It's so ridiculous! Mummy taught me, and she knows no more about it than that stuffed elephant! If I had had proper lessons perhaps I should have liked it better."

"Would you rather have gone on the regular stage?" asked Christie.

"No, I'm not a bit stage-struck. Angela thought of it once, but she soon got tired of fagging round to agents' offices and always hearing the same thing—'Nothing for you to-day, dear!'"

"Your brother has been successful."

"Edgar? Oh yes! But then he's got more sense than all the rest of us put together. I wish Eddy were at home now. He would understand about Joe Buckley and advise me what to do."

They had wandered upstairs and found a quiet corner among the corals and fishes.

"I wish I could advise you, Miss Euterpe!" said Christie impulsively. "Won't you let me try?"

"Oh, Mr. Christie, you don't know all the circumstances," she answered in a pettish voice. "How can you take the place of Edgar?"

"Let me be a brother to you!" he exclaimed.

They both burst out laughing.

"Well, I haven't asked you to be anything else," said the girl, with what Pearl would have called "most unladylike cheek."

"Seriously, I am a great friend of Joe Buckley, as you know," said Christie; "and I want to be a friend of yours. Can't you talk to me as if I were Edgar? Forget that this is only the second time we have met. Tell me all about it! You can trust me. Don't you feel that you can trust me?"

Euterpe looked at him and smiled again.

Women, with few exceptions, find it much easier to confide in a man than in another woman. It is not a question of greater reliance on his judgment, or firmer belief in his sympathy; the reason is too subtle—or too simple—to be defined; but that it is so is one of the things that every woman knows.

Euterpe talked in fits and starts, and her companion did not say a word. She described her first meeting with Joe Buckley; their expeditions; her mother's discovery of the friendship; the melodramatic scenes in which she had played an unwilling part, and Joe's acceptance of a false position, the whole story being frequently punctuated with the word "mummy."

"But if you don't want to marry Joe Buckley, and Joe doesn't want to marry you——" began Christie at last, but she interrupted him fiercely.

"Mummy says he has made a fool of me! I must keep him to his promise, for the sake of my own dignity."

"Now, Miss Euterpe, do you intend to sacrifice your

happiness to your dignity? Honestly—look me in the face—had you any reason to be really angry with Joe until Mrs. Chippett put the idea into your head?"

She evaded the question.

"I think Joe was only playing with me—amusing himself."

"Were you serious with him? Didn't you amuse yourself too till Mrs. Chippett came along?"

She dropped her eyes and dug the point of the Japanese sunshade into the tip of her shoe.

"I like Joe," she said.

"Yes, and Joe likes you, admires you, thinks you're one of the dearest, best little girls in the world; but you're not in love with each other. It isn't the real thing. If you loved him you wouldn't have talked to me in this way. I shouldn't have dared to question you. I should have known instinctively that any interference on my part would have been impertinent and unwarrantable. No, no, Miss Euterpe! You don't care enough for Joe, so it doesn't matter whether he cares enough for you. We can leave him out of the question. He belongs to the Many. He is not the One."

Her spiteful little digs into the shoe-point ceased. She leaned back in the seat with the sunshade laid across her knees, and turned her head as far away from her companion as possible, staring at a case of deep-sea fishes.

When she spoke it was in such a low voice that he had to stoop forward to catch the words.

"I have lost the One! He has gone away and forgotten me."

"Were you engaged to another man before you met Joe?" asked Christie.

"Yes."

There was a change in both of them. Christie asked her no further questions. After a long silence she looked at him again, with dangerously bright eyes.

"He was quite different from us," she said. "Mummy

called him sordid, because he believed in making money in business; and dad said he was only a 'son of the soil,' which was perfectly ridiculous, for he worked at Bridgeman's in Brompton Road."

"What is Bridgeman's?" asked Christie.

He could understand Joe Buckley's infatuation if he had ever seen her look as she did now—tearfully smiling, flushed, and beautiful.

"It's a big drug store, and they sell fancy goods and all that sort of thing," she answered, vaguely. "Victor was in the cash department, but he doesn't really care for clerical work. He wants to go in for business on a big scale, like the American departmental stores. He would have gone to America if—if——"

She stopped a minute to bite her lips, staring again at the gaping sharks.

"If you would have gone with him?" Christie daringly finished the sentence.

There was a still longer interval of silence.

"You wouldn't believe that mummy and dad and Victor lived on the same earth, not to mention in the Brompton Road," said Euterpe in a voice of settled gloom. "They haven't got a single idea in common. Victor didn't care a rap about Art or the xylophone or classical dancing, and he always went to sleep when dad recited. Poor boy! He was worked to death at Bridgeman's. They never forgave him for going to sleep. Then he wore check suits and bright ties, and he said our boys ought to have their hair cut and be packed off to school."

"Did you agree with Mr. Victor's opinions?" asked Christie.

"Victor is his first name," she explained. "His surname is Browne. Mummy says it is so plebeian. Isn't that bosh? It's as good a name as ours, any day. I've never heard of a Lord Chippett, or a Duke of Chippett, have you? I'd just as soon be called Browne as Chippett."

"Perhaps you would rather?" ventured Christie.

Euterpe ignored this question.

" Victor was not at all like Joe Buckley," she went on. " He didn't bow the knee to mummy, and that's what she demands. Then he took no interest in the profession, although he thought Eddy was a trump to go into melodrama, instead of starving because he couldn't act Hamlet right away. Eddy would have understood him and kept the peace between them. If Eddy had been at home——"

She stopped, unable to control her feelings any longer, and pressed her handkerchief over her eyes against the back of the seat.

Christie, thankful that they happened to be alone in the room, consoled her to the best of his ability, gathering the information, between her sobs, that Mr. Victor Browne had been dismissed from Ye Lair " finally, irrevocably, and for ever," to quote Mrs. Chippett, after a stormy scene with the whole family, when his proposal for the hand of Euterpe was formally rejected.

Bridgeman's had recently transferred him to one of their provincial branches, where he had falsified Mrs. Chippett's assertion that he would live and die a penniless clerk by being promoted to the post of manager.

" But what is the use of telling you all this ? " said Euterpe. " Everything is over between us. I am fated to blight the existence of Joseph Buckley ! "

She was really very like her mother at times.

" My dear girl, be brave ! Be sincere ! " implored Christie. " Don't talk about blighting Joe's existence. Break with him ! Give him his freedom and take your own."

" If I do ? " she asked the question very seriously.

" I am sure you will both be happy at once."

She gave her eyes a final dabbing with her handkerchief and straightened her hat.

" What will mummy say ? "

" You must tell her the truth. You don't love Joe

Buckley. You can't marry him. Why not talk to your father? Ask him to help you."

"Dad!" exclaimed Euterpe. "He hasn't the courage of a grasshopper. A mouse is bold and fierce compared with dad."

"Mrs. Chippett is a wonderful woman to fill you all with dread," observed Christie. "I can't understand it."

"That's just what Victor said!" answered the girl. "He didn't like her, but he admired her tremendously. I do believe, if they only met each other once or twice a year, they would be excellent friends. Victor considered that it was one of the advantages of emigrating that it cut a man off from his wife's relations. Mummy said that was a most heartless and inhuman opinion. She never saw Victor's jokes."

They had both risen, and now walked slowly through the rooms, Euterpe with her hands behind her back, trailing her sunshade.

She had quite recovered her self-possession, and her face wore an expression of mischievous pleasure. Christie watched her, pondering the eternal mystery of girls.

"Are we going home?" she said, suddenly. "I'm tired of stuffed animals."

"The great question is still unsettled, Miss Euterpe."

She did not answer until they were outside the building.

"How warm!" she said, opening the sunshade and stepping daintily down the steps; then, in exactly the same tone of voice: "I shall write to Mr. Buckley this evening. Poor fellow! I'm afraid he'll be very wretched."

"Are you going to break it off?" cried her amazed companion.

"Of course!" said Euterpe, as if he were very dense. "But I will leave it to you to inform mummy."

"My dear girl! Is that quite fair?" protested Christie, laughing.

"Fair or not, you'll have to do it," said Euterpe. "I'm afraid to do it myself, and I won't ask Joe Buckley. Joe

and I are strangers from to-day. I'm not going to worry Edgar, or dad, or anybody else in the family, so you must."

"Very well! I'll do my best," said Christie.

They walked on in silence for some distance. Then Euterpe suddenly laid her hand on his arm.

"What a good fellow you are, Mr. Christie!" she exclaimed. "What a good, kind, quiet fellow!"

"Am I?" asked Christie in a tone of genuine pleasure and great surprise.

CHAPTER XXI

THE WAR OF THE CHIPPETTS

THE short chapter in Christie's youth, called by Ettie Boscombe the War of the Chippetts, did not begin on the day of his long talk at the Natural History Museum with Euterpe.

All was peace and harmony when the young people returned to Ye Lair, after having tea in Kensington Gardens.

Entering by the side door, Christie found the dark passage leading to the kitchen stairs blocked with travelling-baskets, Mr. Chippett and his eldest daughter having returned to town on the previous day. He cheerfully climbed over them, assisted Miss Euterpe to do the same, and went upstairs to the drawing-room.

There they found Mrs. Chippett lying on the sofa, reading a huge tome on the Baconian Theory, with a complete edition of Shakespeare on a small table beside her in which to verify quotations, together with a tumbler and glass jug of weak lemonade, from which she took copious draughts at frequent intervals.

"What a subject! What a problem!" were her words of greeting, in allusion to the tome.

Christie begged her not to rise, shook hands, and turned to be presented to a gentleman whom he rightly supposed, after one glance at his brow, to be none other than Theodore Chippett.

Mr. Chippett, seen in the flesh, was somewhat older, heavier, and more wrinkled and harassed than he appeared in photography.

The hair, brushed back from what his wife called his dome of thought, was grey and scanty; he wore his collar open at the neck, like the pictures of Lord Byron, and each

of his hands, that were big and expressive, was adorned with a thick gold signet-ring.

"Charmed!" said Mr. Chippett, acknowledging the young man's respectful bow with a grave inclination of his head, and in so deep a voice that it sounded like "chormed." "I have already heard of your literary efforts from Mrs. Chippett and Euterpe."

Christie, having nothing to say of his literary efforts, remained silent.

"Where are Angela and the children?" said Euterpe, taking off her hat and putting it on a chair.

All the members of the family deposited their hats, gloves, and coats on the drawing-room furniture.

"Angela has taken Audrey and the boys to Madame Shoústova's," replied her mother.

"What a crowd!" exclaimed the girl.

"All will be welcome under the Shoústovas' hospitable roof!" said Mrs. Chippett reproachfully.

"It's very well to talk about hospitable roofs," said Euterpe, whose good temper seemed to vanish directly she entered Ye Lair, "but their rooms are like pill-boxes. I don't think people expect you to go in herds to their At Homes."

"Of course you know our friend, Madame Shoústova, by repute, Mr. Christie?" said Mrs. Chippett, ignoring Euterpe's last remark.

He regretted his ignorance of the lady's name.

"The loss is yours!" exclaimed Mrs. Chippett. "I am sure you will not consider me unflattering when I say the loss is yours. She is a Russian soprano. A most brilliantly gifted woman with an amazing compass. Her husband himself, who was basso profundo at the Imperial Opera House, St. Petersburg, declares he has never heard such another voice in the whole course of his professional career. He is a wonderful judge. We owe the discovery of our second boy, Leonard, to Alexis Shoústova."

Christie looked a little puzzled. Parents usually discover their own children without the assistance of their friends.

"I mean that it was Shoústova who discovered our Leonard was a boy bass," Mrs. Chippett hastened to explain. "We had erroneously supposed, for one can't be expected to know everything, that there was something the matter with his throat that caused him to speak and sing in such a sepulchral voice. His father even found it depressing, so it was a great relief and satisfaction when Alexis Shoústova discovered his voice and prophesied a brilliant future."

"Let us hope it will be fulfilled," said Mr. Chippett in the tone of a response in church.

Having thus, in a most natural manner, introduced her favourite topic of conversation, the gifts and graces of the family, Mrs. Chippett marked her place in the Baconian Theory, closed the book, and entertained the visitor with Chippettania, while Euterpe sat by the window absorbed in her own thoughts and Mr. Chippett dozed, until the return of Angela, Audrey, and the boys.

Angela was a replica of her mother, even to the tight string of cornelian beads round her neck and the alteration of her naturally brown hair to auburn. Her expression was good-tempered, her manner bustling and noisy.

Audrey, the boys, and the dog, that had accompanied them to the At Home, greeted Christie with effusion. They reported a gorgeous time, the chief attractions of the afternoon having been an operatic selection by Madame Shoústova and some friends, a Scotch comic song by a well-known music-hall artist, and strawberry ices.

"Did anybody recite?" asked Mr. Chippett.

"Not a single piece. It was so jolly!" answered Audrey.

"I'm glad you stopped at home, dear," said Mrs. Chippett to her husband. "They would have pressed you to do something, and the Shoústovas' friends, except in music, do not appreciate artistic work. You would have been wasted. I'm afraid they would only care for frivolous selections."

"I might have given something short and bright—'Clarence's Dream,' for instance, or 'They're hanging

Danny Deever in the morning,' by Rudyard Kipling," said Mr. Chippett.

" I don't think those pieces are very cheerful for a party, dad ! " exclaimed Audrey.

Supper was announced before he could reply, so the whole family repaired to the basement, with the exception of the Boy Bass, who lingered behind to finish the weak lemonade.

" We usually take cold food in the breakfast-room—or rather, Mr. Chippett's study—on Sunday evenings, the domestic assistant being absent," explained the hostess as they went downstairs.

" I don't think we ought to have let her go out the first Sunday, for how do we know whether it's true she's got an invalid sister at Chiswick ? I expect it's a soldier, or something horrid of that sort ! " observed Angela in one breath, evidently alluding to the servant engaged since Christie's former visit.

" I shouldn't be surprised if she never came back," said Euterpe, gloomily pursuing the subject. " When I told her we gave entertainments she seemed quite upset, and said it was her doom to be with professionals. The last lady she was with was a ' horse actress.' I suppose she meant a circus rider."

" She won't go off with a soldier," said Audrey, " for she's walking out with a very respectable young man, who hasn't engaged her yet, but she hopes he will. If they get married they'll take a little business. She'd like a fried-fish shop, but the young man says it's too attractive to gentlemen."

" Baby darling," exclaimed Mrs. Chippett, " how often have I told you that it's very vulgar to gossip with servants ? "

Christie, conscious of a vulgar interest in a girl who spoke of living with professionals as her " doom," checked his curiosity and gave his whole attention to his supper.

The table was heavily laden. There were big plates of

bread and butter; a glass bowl filled with lettuce; the ruins of a gooseberry pie and rice pudding; a tiny tin labelled "Potted turkey, tongue and chicken"; and a mysterious joint of meat that Christie supposed to be mutton when he was offered mint sauce as an accompaniment, until somebody passed him apple sauce, suggesting pork, and somebody else asked if he would not take horse-radish, seeming to imply that it was beef.

Not a word was spoken of Joe Buckley. Euterpe was more silent than usual, and disappeared directly after supper to write the letter that gave them both their freedom.

Christie had brought his violin. The whole family, who loved music almost as much as they professed, were delighted to hear him, Mrs. Chippett playing the accompaniments in a spirited, somewhat brass-band fashion.

Then Angela sang, and the Boy Bass rocked the company in the Cradle of the Deep until he was red in the face, and, as his mother said, it was a marvel that his voice could ever come up to the surface again. Clarence performed on the xylophone, mandolin, and banjo one after another, besides displaying his dramatic ability in the Quarrel scenes from "A School for Scandal" with Audrey.

Mr. Chippett, treated by his wife as one whose great talents set him apart from all others, recited some of his longest pieces, reserved for home consumption, to which the three youngest Chippetts listened in absolute silence, proving the perfection, like young Spartans, of early training in endurance.

"Now, Mr. Christie, will you please answer a simple question?" said Mrs. Chippett, in the tone of an examining counsel, when her husband had finished. "Do you consider that an eminent London journalist, who recently attended one of our performances at Balham, overstated the case when he said that Mr. Theodore Chippett's recitations were the grandest respiratory efforts he had ever had the privilege of hearing in the whole course of his career as a dramatic critic?"

"No, he did not overstate the case: I endorse his opinion," said the visitor, with becoming solemnity.

"Thank you, Mr. Christie. That will do!" said Mrs. Chippett, with a triumphant glance at the children, as if they were the jury.

So the evening passed. It was nearly midnight before Christie departed, with mutual expressions of goodwill and cordial friendship.

Less than twenty-four hours later, Euterpe having confessed that her engagement was at an end, he was summoned to Ye Lair to be requested, according to Mrs. Chippett's system with young men, never to darken their doors again. She chose to consider him solely responsible for what had taken place.

Refusing to be dismissed without a hearing, a stormy interview followed, in which he and Mr. Chippett alone remained calm. Euterpe stamped and defied parental authority; Angela wept; Mrs. Chippett raged; the children and the dog quarrelled and howled respectively upon the stairs; while the servant seized the opportunity to get up a violent altercation with the charwoman in the basement.

Christie, when the battle was at its height, suddenly withdrew his forces, ending the lesser skirmishes outside the drawing-room by the whirlwind manner of his retreat. He was out of the house almost before the enemy had realized that he was no longer in their midst, and running down the street.

Safely entrenched in his fortress in Drury Lane, he sent for Joe Buckley, only to receive the discouraging news that Joe, suspecting Mrs. Chippett would be in the field, had retired to the Buckley stronghold in Herefordshire, basely deserting his friend in the thick of the fray.

On the evening of the same day Mrs. Chippett fired a volley from a distance in the form of a six-page letter, in which she called him a "snake in the grass" and "a modern Iago."

Christie promptly retaliated with a full description of the part he had played, saying what he could for the cowardly Joe and manfully defending Euterpe.

The reply to this counter-attack was a still longer epistle, from which he gathered that Euterpe, with the courage of desperation, had opened up communications with her old lover, the banished Victor Browne.

Christie pointed out, in his next, that Mrs. Chippett must not hold him responsible for this, although at the same time he boldly commended her daughter's action.

In her retort, by the next post, Mrs. Chippett made a wily attempt to lure him to Ye Lair, but a note of warning from Euterpe, who reported that Victor Browne was making a forced march on Brompton Road at the end of the week, saved him from falling into the trap.

Then Mrs. Chippett called a parley. Christie had not appealed in vain, she said on a post card, to her sense of justice and Englishwoman's love of fair play. She exonerated him from all blame in the threatened attack of Victor Browne.

Christie's next manœuvre was to soften her heart towards Euterpe's lover, urging his constancy, independence, and rapid promotion in business.

Mrs. Chippett promptly sent her aide-de-camp, Angela, under cover of a white parasol, to discuss this point in Drury Lane.

It appeared, on discussion, that Angela secretly sympathized with Euterpe, but had hitherto lacked the courage to openly support her sister's cause. She praised Victor, who almost equalled Mr. Christie, she was good enough to say, in "standing up to mummy." For Joe Buckley she expressed supreme contempt, but whether for falling in love with "Terp" in the first place, or falling out in the second, Christie could not determine.

The departure of the aide-de-camp was succeeded by a long interval of silence.

The week ended, Christie having no means of ascer-

taining whether Victor Browne's assault on Ye Lair had been a success or a failure. Then a hasty and incoherent dispatch from Euterpe showed that the battle was still raging fiercely.

" Victor is in London ; he has called twice. Mummy is furious, but dad is getting reasonable ; he is going to see you."

These words ended her letter, the construction naturally leading the recipient to suppose that he was to be honoured with a visit from Mr. Chippett, forgetting that Victor Browne represented the only pronoun, third person masculine, to Euterpe at this time.

Victor arrived, fresh from a sally in Brompton Road.

He was one of the most practical, cheerful, genuine, bullet-headed young men whom Christie had ever had the pleasure of meeting—the very antithesis of a Chippett.

He mentioned Euterpe by the singularly inappropriate name of Puss, and called her a " chatty little soul," thereby proving that to him she was a very different girl from the silent, sullen Euterpe known to her family and Joe Buckley.

Victor discussed his tactics, and gave as full an account of his affairs and prospects as if he, Christie, were Euterpe's legal guardian.

He endorsed the opinion that Mr. Chippett was getting reasonable, while Angela, Edgar (by letter), and the children had openly espoused the lovers' cause.

Christie could not help admiring Mrs. Chippett, harassed and beset on every side, but still holding the fortress, unconquered.

When she sent him a distracted post card, the day following Victor Browne's visit to Drury Lane, he had not the heart to refuse her request :—

" Mrs. Chippett hopes Mr. Christie will call upon her at his earliest convenience, to-morrow if possible, as Mrs. C. has much to say and many points to explain."

A new domestic assistant, her predecessor having been

dismissed for aggressive partisanship in the late hostilities, admitted him to Ye Lair.

The portico had been repaired—thanks to the energy, he learned afterwards, of Victor Browne—and the drawing-room was gay with flowers, the gifts of the conqueror.

Mrs. Chippett received him alone—calm, dignified, bent, but not broken.

She opened the conversation with a command that the name of Joe Buckley should never be mentioned under that roof. Joe, whom everybody had forgotten in the alarums and excursions of the past weeks, was a convenient scapegoat on whom to lay the sins of Euterpe and Victor Browne. Christie promised never to mention him.

" Under this roof ! " repeated Mrs. Chippett impressively, as if to imply that he might be discussed in the garden.

" I understand," said Christie, glancing, like Mrs. Chippett, at the ceiling.

She then gave him a verbatim report, as far as her memory allowed, of what Mr. Chippett had said, Victor had said, Euterpe and Angela had said, the children had said, and Edgar had written.

This took a long time, but it naturally led the way to a description of Mrs. Chippett's own romance, when Mr. Chippett's suit had not been received at the outset with parental favour.

Euterpe, perhaps prompted by her father, had recalled this fact to her mother's recollection at the end of a stormy discussion.

She had not pleaded in vain, said Mrs. Chippett, for when Victor arrived in a humble frame of mind, but undaunted by rebuffs, her firmness gave way.

She could no longer refuse to sanction an engagement approved by her husband, her Edgar, her Angela, and the children. She had sent for their dear, their trusted old friend, Felix Christie—this was only his fourth visit—to witness that peace and happiness was again restored to their simple, but not inartistic, home.

Thus ended the War of the Chippetts.

CHAPTER XXII

HOW MRS. CHRISTIE TOOK CARE OF MRS. BOSCOMBE

IT is to be presumed that a young girl betrothed to a devoted lover, within measurable distance of their marriage, is to be counted among the happiest beings in the world.

Pearl Henning was in this position, but she was far from happy. She was thick-skinned and not easily embarrassed, but a life of daily, almost hourly, deception had begun to affect her naturally strong nerves.

The majority of women can successfully double their parts in the drama called Everyday Life, often turning it thereby into a comedy, occasionally into a tragedy, and slipping from one type of character to another with extraordinary ease.

For instance, stormy tears in solitude will give place, at the tinkle of the visitor's bell, to the most convincing cheerfulness ; the chief actress in a violent quarrel with a sister or brother becomes, at the approach of a possible lover, the meekest, most sympathetic little girl in the domestic cast.

A mother will often act so beautifully for the sake of her children that it becomes second nature—angel nature—while many a petty tyrant at home is an eloquent advocate of freedom abroad.

Pearl had assumed her second part in sheer thoughtlessness and pleasure in the game, little dreaming that Felix Christie and Mr. Albert Gambol, men who were the poles asunder, would ever give her a minute's trouble.

She had kept her engagement to Christie a secret until Mr. Gambol suspected it. She still kept her flirtation with the hairdresser a secret, because Felix never suspected it.

A third admirer would have found it easy to snatch her away from his two rivals, for she was getting heart-sick of the secrecy and strain, but no third admirer appeared upon the scene.

She had thought a great deal about Houghton Buckley after their meeting at the little shop in Drury Lane, but Houghton had only thought about her, and in a critical manner that would have astounded Miss Henning, in connexion with his friend Felix Christie.

The unexpected arrival of Mrs. Christie had added to Pearl's perplexities. They disliked each other from the first, and although Pearl was generally good-tempered, the older woman made her nervous and irritable, while Mrs. Christie would not even admit that she was pretty.

" I never had no use for a bouncin' blonde ! " she said.

Unfortunately Millidew overheard this speech and maliciously repeated it to Pearl, who deeply resented the adjective. She never had bounced ; she never would bounce ; she flattered herself she was too much of a lady to dream of bouncing in any circumstances.

It was repeated to Mr. Gambol, but the hairdresser seemed to think the word was not so ill-chosen, though he substituted " beauty " for blonde.

It was repeated to Christie, who pleaded for his mother, while propitiating his love.

Finally, it was repeated to Ettie Boscombe, who persuaded Pearl to let the bounce die out.

Ettie herself had cause to resent Mrs. Christie's interference in her affairs, but she did not know it. The stern New England woman and Mrs. Boscombe kept their counsel.

Mrs. Boscombe, placid and pale in her bed, had expected Mrs. Christie to join in the chorus of her friends' pity.

She read and forgot novels as of old, ate delicately of good fare, and frequently thanked Heaven for her increasing capacity for sleep.

Mrs. Christie, who had had wide experience of "sick folks," studied Ettie's mother with great interest, listened in silence to Mrs. Poole's elaborate accounts of the poor lady's supposed sufferings, and questioned Felix on the nature and growth of her mysterious complaint. He could give her little satisfaction, and Ettie always avoided the subject.

"Say, Felix, I want you to take that girl for a day's outing. She never gets a vacation from 'tending her sick mother, as far as I can judge," said Mrs. Christie to her son, several weeks after her arrival in London.

"I suppose you mean Ettie Boscombe, mother?" he answered.

"That's so," said Mrs. Christie. "I want you to take her off right after breakfast, some mornin', and give her a real good time."

"With pleasure, if she'll accept the invitation, mother. I think we'll ask Pearl to go with us."

"Ah! I suppose she'd scratch your eyes out of your head if you didn't," muttered Mrs. Christie.

Ettie, little suspecting what was in Mrs. Christie's mind, consented to accompany her friends with gratitude and delight. Mrs. Christie was to take care of Mrs. Boscombe, and received her instructions in grim silence. There was no medicine to be administered, but the meals were most important.

Left to herself in the sitting-room in Waterloo Road, after the gay departure of the two girls and her son, she sat down by the window, knitting in hand, to look at the endless stream of passers-by.

She disliked London streets, but was unable to resist the temptation of watching the people, like a Puritan at a play, fascinated against her will. But after a while her busy fingers became still. Her expression changed, and

gradually she lost interest in the scene, for her thoughts had drifted far away—far over the sea—far into the past.

Mrs. Boscombe had tinkled her hand-bell three times before it startled her out of her reverie. Then she rose, with her usual air of inflexibility, gathered up a dropped stitch in her knitting, and walked slowly and deliberately into the adjoining room.

Mrs. Boscombe, about to ring the bell for the fourth time, looked rather flushed and agitated. She wore a pretty pink dressing-jacket, with lace ruffles, and several rings on her white hands.

"Well, ma'am?" said Mrs. Christie, approaching the bed, with her eyes on her knitting-needles.

"Didn't you hear me ring before?" asked the invalid querulously. "I was quite alarmed. I thought you had gone away."

"No, I was right there," replied her guest.

"Well, it doesn't matter," said Mrs. Boscombe, recovering her mild good temper. "I want my lunch, if you please, dear Mrs. Christie, and will you be so kind as to take away this newspaper and close the window? I'm afraid there's a draught. It was so stupid of Ettie to leave it open."

Mrs. Christie glanced at the window, but went on knitting as if she were waiting for further orders.

"I hope you're not a fresh-air fiend?" said Mrs. Boscombe.

Click-click from the knitting-needles, but no response. The fretful expression returned to the invalid's face.

"Give me my lunch, please!" she repeated. "Ettie told me that she left everything ready in the next room. I can only take a glass of wine and a biscuit. I'm a poor, weak creature!"

She leaned on her pillows and closed her eyes, calmly waiting.

Mrs. Christie did not stir. There was a dangerous tightness about her lips. She gave vent, now and again, to a short, sharp sniff.

After a minute Mrs. Boscombe raised her eyelids, fixing her weak blue eyes on her visitor's face.

"Mrs. Christie! What's the matter?" she asked nervously. "Why don't you get me my lunch? Why don't you shut the window? Do you want to make me ill? Are you deaf?"

"No, ma'am, I ain't deaf, and I don't want to make you ill," rejoined the other woman in a hard voice. "But I don't intend to bring you your lunch or shut the window. You can just get up and help yourself!"

Mrs. Boscombe gasped and turned as pink as her dressing-jacket.

"I can't get up!" she cried in a louder voice than she had used for years. "I can't walk! You'll kill me! Mrs. Poole! Mrs. Poole!"

She began to ring her hand-bell wildly, but before its little clapper could tinkle half a dozen times Mrs. Christie had coolly taken it out of her hand.

"Don't holler!" she said. "Nobody will hear you."

"I'll scream! I'll shriek!"

Mrs. Christie, pocketing the bell, crossed the room and lifted the water-jug off the washstand.

"If you scream, ma'am, I give you fair warnin', I'll throw this cold water right over you. I'm not jokin'. You better take care!"

Mrs. Boscombe clutched at the sheets, shaking from head to foot. Her visitor returned to the side of the bed, carrying the water-jug.

"Your lunch is waitin' in the next room," was all she said.

Then she locked the bedroom door, pocketed the key as coolly as she had pocketed the bell, and departed with the water-jug, leaving the folding-doors open between the front and back rooms.

Mrs. Boscombe began to storm, but it was a very mild storm, like thunder many miles away, for the terror of the water-jug hung over her.

She threatened to jump out of window, or strangle herself with the bedclothes, but the knitting-needles calmly went on clicking. Then she pretended to faint, calling feebly for her smelling-salts.

"You'll find the little green bottle on your bureau," said Mrs. Christie from the sitting-room.

The glass of wine and biscuit remained where Ettie had placed them. Her mother, for the first time for years, actually fasted from her nine o'clock breakfast to her one o'clock dinner.

She awoke from a little sleep to be greeted with a most savoury smell, and raising herself on her elbow, caught a glimpse of the table set for two.

Mrs. Christie stalked into the bedroom.

"Now, ma'am, I guess you're pretty sharp by this time, and your dinner is ready for you to eat," she said.

"Then why don't you bring it in?" whimpered Mrs. Boscombe.

Mrs. Christie tightened the bow of her apron-strings and gave her head a decided shake.

"If you were real sick I'd wait on you hand and foot," she answered. "But you ain't! Come now, the flies will have clawed up all the victuals if you wait much longer."

With this alarming prophecy she returned to the sitting-room. The savoury smell was more than Mrs. Boscombe could resist. She was very hungry. Ettie would never have treated her so heartlessly! Ettie would not have allowed her to starve within sight of food.

Very, very slowly, to the accompaniment of groans, she rose from her bed, put on her quilted dressing-gown and the soft slippers her daughter had made, and crept to the open door. An arm-chair was ready for her, and her stern friend was placing the dishes on the table.

"You sit down, ma'am, and start right away," said Mrs. Christie.

At first Mrs. Boscombe only shook her head and sighed, collapsed into the chair, and continued groaning. Then

she began to eat. The groaning ceased. She felt better. Her face regained its placid expression.

Mrs. Christie was an excellent cook, and cooking was the one accomplishment in the world Mrs. Boscombe admired and respected. Sipping her usual glass of wine—she fetched it herself without being told from the sideboard—she spoke to her companion for the first time.

" Why were you so cruel to me this morning ? You can see for yourself I can hardly walk. All this terrible exertion may be the death of me."

" Now, ma'am, if you're through with your dinner," said Mrs. Christie, " I'll help you to dress yourself, and then you can sit in the sun by the window while I wash the dishes."

" I think I ought to go back to bed," pleaded the invalid.

" No, ma'am ! You are goin' to stop up."

The tone of command was absolute. There was no need for a glance at the water-jug in the corner.

Half an hour later Mrs. Boscombe, fully dressed, sank into her arm-chair by the sunny window.

She watched, through tearful eyes, her visitor clear away the dinner-things. How she longed for Ettie ! For the first time in her life she fully appreciated the gentleness and patience of her daughter.

When Mrs. Christie had made both rooms tidy, washed her own hands, and taken off her apron, she also sat down by the window, choosing a straight-backed chair and producing her knitting.

" Now, Mrs. Boscombe," she said, " I want to talk to you about your complaint."

" I—I think I would rather not," stammered the poor lady, but Mrs. Christie ignored her faint objection.

" I've studied your complaint since I first visited you," she went on. " It didn't puzzle me for long, because I've seen the same kind o' thing in a lighter form at home. You're in a very bad way, ma'am. Your state of health is something turr-able ! "

She rolled out the last word with grim satisfaction.

"What is the matter with me?" said her companion in a frightened whisper, beginning to tremble.

"I'll tell you fast enough what's the matter," said Mrs. Christie, letting her knitting drop upon her knee. "You're suffering from sloth and selfishness. You live for eatin' and drinkin'. You're a silly woman, Mrs. Boscombe, and you're real ugly!"

"How dare you call me ugly?" gasped the other, trembling more and more.

"You don't deserve to be alive," Mrs. Christie continued, as if she had not been interrupted. "You make a slave of Ettie, who is worth a dozen of you any day. You think it's fine to lie in bed, lookin' for all the world like a dressed-up doll, but you ought to be ashamed of your pasty face, and your chalky hands, and your poor feeble feet. The Lord made you a woman, not a livin' corpse."

"Stop! Stop! I can't bear it!" cried Mrs. Boscombe, bursting into tears in earnest.

"You think it's el'gant to be idle and read novels all day, but it ain't—even if you'd got sense enough to understand 'em!" said Mrs. Christie, deaf to her companion's entreaties.

"I do understand them," sobbed Mrs. Boscombe.

"If it wasn't for Ettie you'd go to the union—and serve you right!" continued the unflinching voice, meaning the workhouse. "But you don't appreciate Ettie. Hasn't she worked for you, waited on you, borne all your petty slights without a word of complaint? Women like you oughtn't to have children. You don't know how to love 'em. You only love yourselves."

"I do love my Ettie! I should die without her!"

"Oh, you'll die all right enough, and nobody will be sorry if you don't mend your ways. I give you fair warnin', Mrs. Boscombe! Soon you won't be able to walk. Then you won't be able to eat. Then you'll lie upon your bed like a log, and your heart will break for your wasted life,

but it will be too late—God forgive us all!—too late."

There was a long silence, only broken by the sound of Mrs. Boscombe's shuddering breaths. Mrs. Christie took up her knitting and calmly continued her work. There was no pity or compunction in her face. She hardly glanced at the figure opposite.

The sunshine slowly passed over the window, leaving the house in shadow. Both of the women were immovable, except for Mrs. Christie's busy fingers.

Mrs. Boscombe left off crying, but dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief and gave little choking gasps.

Her companion, when the clock struck half-past four, put down her work and prepared the tea-table.

Her face and manner expressed an ill-disguised satisfaction. If she had not thoroughly enjoyed the day, a feeling of self-righteousness made it a very memorable experience.

"Now, ma'am!" was all she said, when the tea was made, placing a comfortable chair for her victim at the table.

Mrs. Boscombe meekly took her seat. She felt like a reproved child. There was no attempt at conversation. Mrs. Christie only spoke once.

"I hope you won't bear any malice, or act ugly to me in future. I only spoke for your own good," she said.

"If you don't mind, I'll go to bed directly after tea," was all Mrs. Boscombe answered.

When Ettie reached home, accompanied by Felix Christie, she was greeted with unusual warmth by her mother. The poor lady had not wholly recovered her placidity, but she looked very well. She longed to pour her woes into Ettie's ears, but a certain humiliation and prudence bade her be silent.

"I've got such a surprise for you, my dear child," she said, fondling the girl's hand. "What do you think I did this morning?"

Ettie could not guess.

"I got up!" said Mrs. Boscombe, with the air of a heroine.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" cried Ettie. "Did you enjoy it, dear? Did Mrs. Christie help you to dress?"

Mrs. Boscombe looked at Mrs. Christie, and then gave an involuntary glance at the water-jug.

"Mrs. Christie was very kind," she said.

"I'm proud to think that I did you good, ma'am," said the kind friend.

"I shall not forget your goodness in a hurry!" said Mrs. Boscombe, with startling emphasis.

She was *not* an altered woman from that hour. Old habits held her in their grip, but the hard lesson had had its effect. She gave up lying in bed all day—it is more interesting, after all, to live in two rooms than in one—and made a rule of treating Ettie, if not with unselfishness, at all events with a little more consideration.

She actually developed a taste for needlework, and became absurdly proud of her efforts, but expressed the greatest dislike to knitting, even the click of the needles ruffling her even temper.

Felix Christie remained as ignorant as Ettie of what had happened. He was a little surprised at his mother's evident pleasure in her visit, but too incurious to ask any questions.

All his thoughts revolved round Pearl Henning and his book. He wrote at night and in the early morning, devoting the daytime to other literary work.

His output at this time was greater than at any other period of his career, for every guinea earned brought his marriage nearer.

Millidew laughed at his earnestness. Houghton said he would break down. The Chippetts reproached him for neglecting his old friends. Even Sir Charles Buckley, meeting him one day in Mr. Ferguson's room, remonstrated with the young writer.

"You are overworking, Chris," he said. "It is the most

short-sighted policy in the world to tax your brain beyond a certain point. Remember, it is the finest part of a fine machine."

"Why do you think I am overworking?" asked Christie gaily. "I never felt stronger or in better form in my life."

Sir Charles looked at the young man's exceptionally spare figure, light and virile; his bright, clear eyes had grown restless; his strong, but nervous hand fidgeted with the paper-knife on the table.

"I am glad to hear that you feel so well," he said. "But don't forget my warning."

Sir Charles looked after Christie thoughtfully as he went out of the room.

"Strung up to concert pitch! I hope the strings will not snap," he said.

"It is not surprising that the lad is excited," said Mr. Ferguson. "He's going to be married very soon. Houghton told me. Have you heard of it?"

Sir Charles gave a laugh.

"Houghton has marriage on the brain just now. No, I have not heard about Christie. Who is the girl? Do you know her? Is it a matter of congratulation or condolence?"

Mr. Ferguson rubbed his chin, puckering his lips.

"I've seen her," he said. "Oh yes, I've seen her! She's as pretty as a golden pheasant, strutting about in his fine feathers. A bonny bird!"

"Adaptable? Good enough for Chris? Anything in her?" asked his friend sharply.

"Nothing at all!" answered Mr. Ferguson, without a minute's hesitation. "Hopelessly commonplace young woman, but, as I said before, as pretty as a bird. Houghton tells me he's desperately in love with her."

"Poor Christie!" exclaimed Sir Charles—but he added, after a pause, "Happy fellow!"

CHAPTER XXIII

REVELATION

FELIX CHRISTIE was writing the last chapter of his book. Millidew, with a consideration that he rarely showed, had gone out to dinner, leaving him alone. Mrs. Christie was sewing in her own room. He had drawn down the blind of the shop-window, not to be interrupted by possible customers.

His concentration was absolute. Even Pearl—fair, haunting spectre of all his days!—was forgotten for a little while.

He did not hear the noises in the street. The room was filled with the beings of his imagination, the unseen companions of so many months. They were as real, to him, as the men and women of the great world his pages mirrored.

He had laughed and sighed with them. He had seen them grow from mere outlines, vague thought-forms, into definite and strong characters.

The spirit of delight that rarely comes to us had given him joy in his work. His fingers clung to the pen. He was conscious of his own promise and his own achievement.

No book is finished without a pang, but Christie was still too absorbed to fully realize that the last words were so near.

Now and again he paused, resting his head on his hand, to recall one incident or another in the progress of his story or to choose the exact word for the thought to be expressed.

There was a sudden knock at the outer door. Christie started and listened, half inclined to ignore the summons.

The knock was repeated. He rose with an exclamation of impatience and opened the door. Any ordinary visitor would have been summarily dismissed, for it was positively painful to be interrupted at such a minute, but the man who confronted him was Sir Charles Buckley. He entered at once as a matter of course, laid down his hat and stick, and unbuttoned his overcoat.

" Surprised to see me, Chris ? " were his words of greeting as he gave the younger man an especially cordial grasp of the hand.

" Very pleased, Sir Charles."

It was the truth. It always gave him pleasure to meet the head of Buckley's. He was the only visitor in London, except Pearl, whom the young author, writing his last chapter, could have welcomed with sincerity.

" What a gorgeous little place ! " said Sir Charles.

He put his hands on his hips and slowly turned round, taking stock of everything in the room. He was in evening clothes and looked particularly well, in striking contrast to Christie in his oldest suit, with his pale face and ruffled hair.

" Gorgeous ! " Sir Charles repeated the inappropriate word. " I've been dining at my club, the Belvoir, but I would much rather have eaten my dinner with you, if I had only thought of inviting myself ! One gets so tired of big rooms and crowds of men. I'm like Hamlet, man delights not me, no, nor woman neither. That is to say, men and women. The society of one man, or one woman, is a different matter."

He seated himself in the old-fashioned pew, accepted a cigarette, and, clasping his hands behind his head, leaned back against the cushions, looking unusually restful and happy.

Christie, with a longing glance at his manuscript, sat down opposite to his guest.

" I suppose you wonder why I have suddenly appeared on the scene ? " said Sir Charles. " It is to express my gratitude for your goodness to my foolish boy."

"What do you mean?" asked Christie, puzzled for a second.

"Joe and I happened to be alone for a while yesterday evening," he continued, "and he seized the opportunity to follow your advice."

"My advice?"

"Yes; didn't you advise him to take me into his confidence? Well, he did so, and I know all about the Chippett family. You handled the ridiculous affair very tactfully, Chris. Of course, it was not at all serious, but it would have been very annoying to his mother—to us both—if Miss Euterpe Chippett had tried to marry Joe by force."

"I hope you were not too angry with him, Sir Charles."

"Oh no! He's a young philanderer, that's all. I didn't tell him so. Houghton is too fond of lecturing him, but then Houghton is young himself, although he never was a philanderer. One could rely upon his sound common sense when he was quite a little chap. He possesses all the good qualities of my wife's family. Joe is much more of a Buckley."

He smoked in silence for a few minutes, thinking of his boys.

"Perhaps a little resemblance between Joe and myself is the cause of our often drifting apart," he went on. "We can't make allowances for each other. I am too hard upon Joe for the peculiarities I detest in myself. We are both inclined to be melancholy, pessimistic, and super-sensitive."

Christie's expression made him laugh.

"Yes, it is a little amusing to associate Buckley's with super-sensitiveness!" he said. "But it's the truth, all the same."

Christie had never seen him in such a communicative mood. He began to talk of his early days in journalism, and the difficulties he had encountered at the beginning of his prosperous career. Of his private life he said little, except to allude affectionately, if a little satirically, to the

interest his wife's brothers had always taken in the growth of Buckley's. He had many stories to tell of Mr. Ferguson, and told them with a touch of malice, as if there were times when his old colleague's prudence and plodding methods were both an irritation and a reproach.

Christie listened with greater interest in the man than in what he said, his mind constantly reverting to his interrupted work.

It really seemed as if the visitor intended to stop, smoking and talking, all night. Christie was surprised when he suddenly looked at his watch, sprang to his feet, and laid a hand on his overcoat.

"I must go, Chris! I only intended to call in for a quarter of an hour," he said. "I was so anxious to tell you how highly I appreciate your disentanglement of the Chippett problem."

The younger man, embarrassed by the earnestness of the voice in which these light words were spoken, turned away to open the front door, while Sir Charles took up his hat, gloves, and stick.

As Christie's hand closed on the handle, and before he could turn it, there was an exclamation behind him—a strange, wordless sound, like a cry strangled in the throat.

His mother had noiselessly entered the room, holding a lighted candle in her hand.

She was staring at Sir Charles Buckley. Her face was absolutely blank, the unblinking eyes wide open, the lips drawn into a circle slightly apart, the forehead puckered into deep lines from eyebrows to hair.

She was wearing a long grey dressing-gown and looked like a ghost, immovable from head to foot, except for the flickering yellow flame of the candle.

Christie instinctively looked at Sir Charles, but all he saw in his guest's face was a dawning recollection that changed into surprise.

Not a word was spoken. Christie was too amazed—

bewildered for a minute—to attach any meaning to what he had heard and now saw.

It was Sir Charles who broke the silence.

"Prudence!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible?"

Mrs. Christie's name was Prudence.

An extraordinary change passed over her at the sound of his voice. She positively looked as if the blood, having stopped in her veins, rushed on again with painful force.

A shudder swept her from head to foot, and her breast rose and fell in a gasping breath. Then a faint colour showed in her lips and her fixed eyelids quivered.

Christie thought that she would fall down upon the ground. He took a quick step towards her, but she stopped him with an imperative gesture of her hand. Her eyes remained fixed upon Sir Charles.

"Prudence!" he said again, speaking in his ordinary voice, pleasant and unruffled. "I am rejoiced to see you, after all these years! How strange it seems. Shake hands!"

He offered his hand with frank cordiality. She did not take it. He looked a little puzzled, but smiled, as if her reluctance amused as well as surprised him.

"After all these years!" he repeated slowly. "To think of renewing our old friendship in Drury Lane! Prudence Whitton in Drury Lane! Extraordinary!"

Still she did not speak, but a different expression had come into her face. There was indecision in it, mingled with fear. She put down the candle and clutched at the collar of her gown with shaking fingers.

Sir Charles went on talking, kindly and tactfully, placing his hand on Christie's shoulder.

"So this is your son, Prudence? Why didn't you tell me when you got married? I've changed in everything, Heaven knows, since the old days in New England, but I have never forgotten the dear little house with the green shutters. Forgotten it? No! It is the tenderest, most beautiful memory of my lost youth."

He gave a deep sigh. Then he suddenly went close to Mrs. Christie and clasped one of her trembling hands in his own, raising it to his lips. She swayed a little and closed her eyes. Then she looked at him again and spoke—in a hoarse whisper—close to his ear :

" Felix is not my son ! "

" Mother ! " cried the young man, but she did not heed him.

" Felix is Mehala's son ! " she said.

Sir Charles Buckley recoiled. He repeated the words mechanically, as if he did not understand them.

" Mehala's son ! "

He struck his forehead with his clenched hands.'

" Mehala's son ! " he said again. " Mehala—my wife ! "

Then he turned on Christie with sudden passion, and glared into his face.

" My God ! " he said. " Oh, my God ! "

His eyes filled with tears. He put his arm round the young man's neck and drew him close. Then he covered his face with his hands and sat down in the old pew, his head drooping forward and his shoulders heaving.

The woman's gaze was no longer bent upon him. She was watching Christie.

" Charles Buckley is your father," she said. " He was married to my sister, who died at your birth."

" Mother ! " exclaimed Christie again, turning from the man to the woman.

" I am not your mother, Felix," said Mrs. Christie. " No mother ever loved her child more'n I've loved you — but Mehala Whitton was your mother — his wife."

" My poor little girl ! " said Buckley, in a voice strangely unlike his own. " My poor little Matty ! "

Then he sprang to his feet and threatened the woman with his raised hand.

" You lied to me ! " he said. " You told me the child was dead. I thought that part of my life was all over.

It was like a dream to look back upon. We were both so young . . . little Matty . . . hardly a dozen of my friends know I have been twice married."

He began to pace backwards and forwards in the narrow room, quickly recovering his self-control and already busy in adjusting his thoughts to the new idea.

Christie sat down by the writing-table, where his manuscript lay open. He absently covered the pages with a sheet of blotting-paper. It had lost its interest.

"Why are you mad with me, Charles Buckley?" he heard Mrs. Christie saying. "What have I done to injure you? Haven't I cared for your son all these years? Didn't I care for your wife?"

"You have done me an incalculable injury," said Buckley. "You lied at the beginning, and robbed me of the consolation I should have found in my child. You were cruel to my poor little wife."

"I loved Mehala!" she cried fiercely.

He gave a contemptuous laugh.

"You made her life wretched. You have made her son wretched. You need not think that Felix has betrayed you in words——"

He looked at Christie for the first time proudly.

"Felix has never said a word against you, but I can read between the lines of his story. You darkened his childhood with the gloomy bigotry that you call religion. You tried to silence the music in his heart. You sent him out into the world practically penniless. His arm was crippled with overwork, while you were hoarding his mother's money as well as your own. You see I have a good memory for money affairs, Prudence."

"You were always cruel," she muttered.

Christie rose and crossed the room. He put his arms round her, and she leaned against him, trembling.

"Poor boy!" exclaimed Buckley. "You couldn't even leave him in peace here. You came without warning, and he has had to adapt his life to yours. I'll swear you've

abused the girl he loves. I'll swear you disparage his friends and try to belittle his work. I know you of old!"

He stopped abruptly and again paced the floor.

Christie pressed the woman whom he had called his mother for so long more closely against him. He added no word to the fierce reproaches of the man who was his father, but he looked at him with intense earnestness.

"How have you injured me?" continued Buckley, reverting to Mrs. Christie's words. "You are responsible for my false position with my second wife—her son is no longer my heir. Poor Houghton! My dear boy! You are responsible for my long neglect of Felix. You are responsible for the misery I suffered—wifeless, childless—at the outset of my career."

He stopped in front of her, coldly studying her white, upturned face. His own was pitiless.

"Good God! What a brute I was to leave Mehala to *your* tender mercy!" he exclaimed.

Mrs. Christie caught at his hand.

"I loved my little sister!" she wailed. "We were all the world to each other, Charles, till you came along."

He shook off her clinging fingers, with a word of utter contempt. He stood for several seconds in silence, his eyes on the ground. Then he shrugged his shoulders, and, lifting his head, returned the steady gaze of his son.

"I can't talk to you to-night," he said. "But you can rest assured I will do everything in my power to serve you."

A slight smile passed over Christie's face at the formal words. He gave no answer.

"You are my legitimate son," said Buckley. "I acknowledge the claim that you have upon me. I have reason to be proud of you, but—forgive me, Felix—I cannot forget the difference this revelation will make to my boy, Houghton."

"I have made no claim upon you," said Christie quietly.

"I believe this woman absolutely," continued Sir Charles, ignoring his words. "The first time that I saw you at

my own house I was stirred with vague, half-painful, half-pleasurable memories of my boyhood. I thought of your mother when I looked into your face. Your mother was very beautiful, Felix. She lived in a fair world of her own. I can never think of her without realizing the truth of the words, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.'"

He turned abruptly away, but looked over his shoulder as he laid his hand upon the door.

"Will you come to see me to-morrow, Felix? Do not come to my house, or we shall be interrupted. Come to the Belvoir in the evening."

Christie moved forward and held out his hand. Sir Charles clasped it in silence and went away.

The young man closed the door and looked at Mrs. Christie. She was huddled in her chair, rocking backwards and forwards, muttering to herself. He pondered for a minute, then sat down beside her.

"Don't be so unhappy," he said gently. "I can't bear to see you cry. Hush! Hush!"

She broke into wild, incoherent words, and tried to kneel down at his feet. His hands were wet with her tears. All her being seemed to be riven asunder.

The barrier of pride—rage—jealousy—revenge—all the passions of her hidden soul—were swept away in the flood of her remorse.

Then she told her story, in broken sentences. Her black hair was torn about her face, her whole body shook, and she spoke with the unconsciously dramatic force of the untrained, truthful woman of the people, without subtlety and without restraint.

She described the old New England homestead in her parents' lifetime, simple and puritanical, the Whitton family tracing their descent, in an unbroken line, from the days of the Pilgrim Fathers.

Her own father, as she spoke of him, stood out clearly in Christie's imagination—stern, pious, disciplined—with his well-matched wife of the same character as his own.

The loss of two sons in infancy had filled them both, not with resignation, but with a silent bitterness that the birth of their third child, a daughter, failed to assuage. They called her by the old family name of Prudence, and for many years she lived the solitary life of an only child.

Then, to disappoint them for a second time, another girl was born at the old homestead—Mehala, a sensitive, shy, lovely little creature on whom Prudence showered all the devotion of her passionate, undeveloped nature.

When the elder sister was still a young girl, and the younger a child, their parents died within a few months of each other. The farm was sold, the small fortune it realized being divided equally between the two girls.

Prudence, in spite of her youth and inexperience, assumed control of their affairs, ordering everything in their new home after the manner of the old. She was absolutely satisfied with her life—cleaning, sewing, attending chapel—and wondered at the strange difference between herself and the little sister whom she ruled and worshipped.

Mehala was very pretty ; Prudence looked upon beauty as a snare of the Evil One. Mehala could sing ; Prudence thought that all music should begin and end with a chapel harmonium. Mehala was naturally light-hearted and gay ; Prudence had been taught to regard this happy world as a place of gloom.

" I see what I did now, Felix," said Mrs. Christie. " I forgot that the Lord makes the birds and the flowers as well as the forests and the awful storms. I forgot that He made my darling's little dancing feet the same as He made my working hands."

When she was eighteen Mehala was parted, for the first time, from her sister, Prudence having consented, after long opposition, to her paying a short visit to an old schoolfellow at a neighbouring town.

" I was awful lonesome," Mrs. Christie continued her story. " I couldn't sleep at night for wonderin' what she was doin', where she was goin', whether she was taking care

of herself among all those worldly folks. I hoped she was homesick. I couldn't bear to think of her bein' happy for an hour away from me.

"I thought it was real good of me to feel that way, but I see now that it was only selfishness. I wanted her to miss me and be lonesome, same as I missed her.

"I couldn't bear to sit in the house evenings, without havin' Matty to run in and out, so I used to take my sewin' out on the verandah.

"I was sittin' there one night, just when the sun was settin', when I first saw your father."

"My father!" said Christie. "How strange that sounds. My father!"

"He came and stood in our garden," she went on, "looking at the house for all the world as if it was a show. I can see him now! He was very young, and he'd got his hat in his hand, so that his hair was all blown about his head. It was kind o' soft, wavy hair, not grey and short like it is now, and he moved quick in those days and laughed very often—like you did, Felix, when you were a boy in Mapleville, and he was always kind and gentle.

"He began to talk to me, friendly and pleasant, and asked me all sorts of questions 'bout our little home. I never heard anybody talk like he did. I was bewitched, Felix. I was only a young woman, after all, I didn't ought to be hard on myself for bein' like other girls."

She paused for several seconds.

"I want to be truthful," she went on, "so I'm bound to tell you, right now, that Charles Buckley was not to blame for my unhappiness. He didn't mean to make me think about him—mornin', noon, and night.

"He was just amusin' himself, or tryin' to be friendly —I don't know, and he has forgotten long ago. Oh yes, he's forgotten those days! Men do forget, but women——"

Again she stopped. Christie took her hand in his and held it fondly.

"Well, Mehala came home," she said. "I was so glad

to see her come home. She looked so well. I never saw her so full of fun. She was a clip! But it didn't last long. I didn't hold with fun, and our house seemed to chill her off.

"Then she met Charles Buckley. At first I didn't care. I liked to hear her laugh at his foolin'. I thought that he took to her for my sake. They made me feel old, and you don't know what a terrible feelin' that is sometimes to a woman. I began to keep away from them both.

"Charles didn't notice, or didn't care, but Mehala used to cry about it. I've locked myself in my room, times out of number, and heard her cryin' outside, and it tore my heart, but I wouldn't open the door. Oh, my little Matty! My little Matty!"

Once more she rocked backwards and forwards in her chair, and sobbed, and clutched at her gown.

"So it went on for weeks, and sometimes I couldn't bring myself to speak to either of them. I practised so as not to show any feeling in my face. Mehala got afraid of me, and I hated him—no! I loved him—always, always, through it all.

"Then one day they went out together in a sleigh, for it was the first cold snap of the year. She ran back to say good-bye to me, but I wouldn't kiss her. They looked so happy! They were just a boy and girl. And that day they were married at the nearest big town. Charles had arranged it all. It's easy enough to get married quick in the States.

"At night they came home and told me, and I let on that I didn't care. I wished 'em joy, and they went off again the next day on their honeymoon. Then I was all alone, but I didn't shed a tear or say a word to stop 'em. I sealed up my heart and my lips, but they've broken open at last, thank God, at last."

She grew calmer, and continued her story in a low, tremulous voice.

"I didn't see anything of Mehala for nearly a year, but she wrote to me, and her husband wrote too. He was a great hand at letter-writin' in those days."

Christie smiled at this. He had heard Houghton Buckley say, more than once, that Sir Charles was a bad correspondent and hated letter-writing.

" Then one night in the winter, I was sittin' alone in our parlour, readin' a good book," continued Mrs. Christie, " when I heard a jingle of sleigh-bells in the quiet street. They stopped at our door.

" They had come back, and when I saw them come in —so happy and good-lookin'—I felt more than ever like an old, old woman whose life was nearly over.

" There was no need for Matty to whisper her secret. I saw what was comin', and she'd made him bring her all the way from Canada, where they'd been livin', so as her baby should be born in her old home.

" It seemed that he had to go back to the old country. His father had died suddenly and left a newspaper business for him to look after.

" So it was settled that Matty should stop with me till she was able to join him. So he went away, and I thought her heart would break, but she mastered herself real courageous for the sake of the future.

" I guess he wrote her every mail. She tried not to be lonesome, and she was very good to me. So lovin' and amiable ! I was terribly anxious when her time drew near. I couldn't sleep at nights, an' I hated to have her out of my sight."

Mrs. Christie put up her hand and touched Felix's hair.

" You're very like your mother, sonny," she said. " Well, the day came at last. Awful day and awful night ! My darling's child was born at dawn, and she only lived long enough to hear it was a boy. ' Write to Charles,' were the last words I heard her say.

" I think I went off my head for a little while. I was so scared and unhappy.

" Well, your father had made me promise to send him a cable directly the child was born. I forgot all about it till late at night.

" Then I sat down to write the message, but while I was makin' up my mind how to tell him the sad news, the nurse came into the parlour to ask me to take care of the baby for a few minutes. I went upstairs to my bedroom and looked at the tiny creature.

" We were all alone and it began to cry. I took it up in my arms, and suddenly—holdin' it against my breast—I felt as if I couldn't give it up. I had loved its mother. I had loved its father.

" But I knew that Charles would come back and take it away. He had taken my Matty away ! It turned its tiny face round and nestled into my breast. Then I made up my mind, and I never wavered from that resolution for a minute.

" I sent off the cable, telling Charles that both his wife and child had passed away. I wrote him a long letter the next day, describing how they died. It was all easy enough. He had no friends in our town who knew his address in London, even if they had wanted to write.

" I told the few folks who knew us that Mehala's husband had deserted his child. They thought I was real good to take care of it so well. Do you despise me, Felix ? "

" No," he answered quickly.

" You don't know how I loved you when you were helpless," she went on. " I'm one of those simple women who love children best when they're very little. When you were goin' on two years we went to Canada. Charles had left off writin' to me, because I didn't answer his letters. He told me he was goin' to marry again—I couldn't forgive him that—only a year after Matty's death.

" I sold up our old home, and didn't tell a soul where I was goin'. I meant to change my name and call you my own son."

" Why did you choose to go to Mapleville ? " he interrupted.

" Because I'd known a girl at school, years before, whose uncle had gone to Mapleville. She was always

talkin' about him. He was a French-Canadian, she told us, named Batiste."

"My old friend, Monsieur Batiste!" exclaimed Christie.

"Yes, old Batiste," said Mrs. Christie. "You know how I let on that I was a widow, and nobody doubted me. But I wasn't happy. A curse seemed to lie upon me. My life was bound up in you, Felix, but I didn't treat you well. I know that. I knew it all the time, *but I could not alter*. Every day made me harder and more miserable.

"I saw your mother looking at me out of your lovin' eyes. I saw your father, to reproach me, in all your quick, clever ways.

"You never knew me as I might have been. You never guessed that I was a woman who had suffered in secret, but loved in secret too."

Christie did not answer, for he saw in her face, with the dark hair swept back from its white intensity, the expression he had seen, and never understood before, on the memorable night of the revivalist meeting in the chapel at Mapleville.

"I wasn't always mean to you, Felix," she continued appealingly. "Sometimes I felt as if I could cry to see you so silent at home, unlike other children. But your spirit was never broken. I was jealous of all your playfellows. I was jealous of your music. I wouldn't say a word to stop you comin' to the old country, but I thought I should die on the mornin' you left home.

"Do you remember how I shut the door, quick, before you had gone half down the street? Ever since then I have been makin' up my mind to come over to see you. I never dreamed of meetin' your father."

"You must have heard me speak of him again and again," said Christie.

"Yes, and directly I saw that young man's photo—his youngest son—I began to wonder whether I ought to tell you the truth. Charles Buckley is very wealthy and successful, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then you will get your rights!" exclaimed Mrs. Christie. "You're the heir to his title. You're his eldest son."

"Don't let us talk of that to-night," said Christie quietly.

"No, I can only think of the past, Felix," she answered, beginning to cry again. "I might have made your life so happy. I ought to have given you your mother's share of the money. I've acted mean and ugly to you all the time. I feel as if all my self-respect was swept away. I'm not righteous any longer. But I'm at peace! My hard heart is softened. I can speak. I shall be able to pray. Oh, Felix!"

She threw herself into his arms, hung upon his neck, and he held her closely, stooped, and kissed her forehead.

"Mother!" he said in a broken voice. "I shall always call you that—mother!"

It was past midnight when Felix Christie, alone at last, sat down at his writing-table and took up his pen. But he could not work. His book was forgotten.

He thought of that far New England home where his life had begun. He thought of the long struggle, the passion and the pain, of the woman whom he had consoled and uplifted. He thought of his lonely childhood.

Then he thought of his father in the romance of his youth, and of his dead mother in all the grace and beauty of her young love.

Suddenly, to his own intense surprise, tears rushed into his eyes, and he laid his head down upon his folded arms, hiding his face.

CHAPTER XXIV

CHRISTIE AND SIR CHARLES BUCKLEY

FELIX CHRISTIE went to the Belvoir Club, on the following night, to keep his appointment with Sir Charles Buckley.

He was conscious of a quickening of his blood, without being actually nervous, as he neared the presence of the man to whom he had suddenly become of such vast importance.

It was not affection that moved him, but the interest he had always taken in Sir Charles's character was intensified. He did not for a moment expect to rival Houghton or Joe in his father's estimation. It was impossible to forget Sir Charles's involuntary expressions, in the hour of revelation, regarding Houghton—"My dear boy!" and "My poor Houghton!"

Every word he had spoken showed that, in spite of his sense of justice and sincere regret at the false position in which Felix had been placed, he was chiefly concerned for the future welfare of his younger sons.

This knowledge was uppermost in Christie's mind when he again met his father. It had strongly influenced the decision to which he had arrived, but there was no bitterness or jealousy in his acceptance of the truth.

There was also a touch of curiosity in his attitude towards Sir Charles. It would be instructive to discover how a man of the world—a shrewd, successful man of social ambition—proposed to introduce an unheard-of son to his host of friends and acquaintances.

Houghton was a member of the Belvoir Club, and Christie

met him on the steps. Young Buckley looked particularly handsome and happy.

"Hullo, Chris! My father's expecting you," he said as they passed each other.

"How are you? Where are you going?" answered Christie, laying a detaining hand on his arm.

He had had no idea until that minute that the realization of brotherhood, the secret knowledge of the tie of blood, would affect him so strangely. He had always liked Houghton Buckley, but now he was swept with a wave of warm affection for him, not unmixed with pride.

"Where am I going?" repeated Houghton, with a laugh. "I'm going to the Pargetters. Mrs. Pargetter is giving a small dance to-night. Good-bye, old man!"

Christie was taken to Sir Charles Buckley in one of the small rooms of the club. He was sitting in a little group of men, but taking no part in their conversation, although his critical glance was directed towards each speaker in turn with an air of real or assumed interest.

He was laughing at some jest as Christie approached, and looked at the young man with an unchanged expression. They might have been strangers meeting for the first time. Christie realized, as their eyes met, that Sir Charles had entirely recovered from the shock and emotion of the previous night.

He detached himself from his friends, shook hands with his guest, and led the way to a quiet corner of the room.

"We shall not be interrupted or overheard," he said, pushing forward a chair. "Sit down, Chris. Will you smoke?"

Christie declined. Sir Charles lighted a cigar.

"I call you 'Chris' by force of habit," he said lightly. "Do you know why my amiable sister-in-law assumed the name of Christie?"

"No. I suppose it did as well as any other."

"True. Why 'Felix'?" asked Sir Charles.

"That was my mother's choice before I was born. Mrs. Christie told me so last night."

"Ah!"

Sir Charles shifted his chair, so that he could look down into the busy street out of the window beside him. He leaned his head on his hand, in the attitude that reminded Christie of his well-known portrait, with his eyes moving restlessly over the hurrying crowds on pavement and road.

"You look very tired," said Christie.

"I slept rather badly," he answered; "but I was up at my usual hour this morning and got a ride before breakfast."

"Would you like me to go away?"

"Oh no, my dear boy! I never allow fatigue or laziness to interfere with business."

"Have we met to talk—business?"

Sir Charles turned away from the window, shaking off his languor.

"It must have occurred to you, Chris," he said, slowly, "that I am in a position to dispute, if I choose, the truth of the assertion Mrs. Christie—we will call her Mrs. Christie—made last night. What proof have I, except the word of this woman, that you are the son whom I was solemnly assured died at his birth?"

"Do you intend to dispute the assertion?" asked Christie.

The question, so quietly put, seemed to surprise his companion.

"You take the possibility very calmly," he answered. "Have you any idea what it would cost you to establish your right even to bear my name? Do you realize that, if I cared to do so, I could treat you both as absurd impostors?"

He paused for a minute, looking at Christie curiously, searchingly, as if his words were an experiment. One of his thin, nervous hands fidgeted with the exquisite lælia in his buttonhole.

"Let us suppose that you are able to prove the truth of Mrs. Christie's statement. What is gained? During my lifetime, nothing! I am a fairly rich man, and my wealth is increasing year by year—money makes money, you know, I need not explain my affairs—but as we are not in possession of entailed estates, I need not leave a penny to you. After my death, you would have a handle to your name—that is all! Hardly worth considering, I should imagine, in these days of so many knights and baronets."

"I can only repeat my question, Sir Charles. Do you doubt the truth of Mrs. Christie's story?"

Sir Charles was silent for a full minute, looking his companion in the eyes, before he answered.

"No, Chris."

Another pause, and then he said deliberately:

"I believe Mrs. Christie. I have only been trying to show you the course which many men would pursue. It is not in my nature to pursue that course. I know my sister-in-law—her slow, revengeful temper, her jealousy, her peculiar self-repression—but I also know that her honour and veracity are inviolable, to say nothing of the evidence written by nature in your face. I cannot look at you without seeing your mother. I cannot think of your character, as I have observed it, without seeing myself."

He spoke the last words very emphatically, striking his hand upon the arm of his chair.

"It is very simple of you, my dear Chris, even to ask me if I acknowledge your claim," he continued in his usual voice. "Should I have accepted the statement as I did last night if I had not instantly believed in its truth? Should I be talking to you at this minute if I thought otherwise? No! I am resigned."

"Resigned?" questioned Christie.

"Resigned to the situation," explained Sir Charles. "If you think of it, an extremely awkward one. Were I in the position of the heartless, middle-aged Lothario of

novels and melodramas—well, it would undoubtedly simplify matters for me. Legally you would not exist. When I asked Mrs. Christie if you were her son, she did *not* reply, ' Yes, and you are his father ! ' When you come to think of it, there was novelty in our little scene last night, Chris ! I did not see, when I looked at you, the shadow of an old, half-forgotten sin. I believe that's the correct phrase. No, I saw the cherished love of my youth renewed. It rose up before me in all its innocence and beauty."

Still Christie remained silent. After a few seconds Sir Charles gave a little laugh.

" This sentimental talk, however, does nor affect the awkwardness of the situation. That is what I have to consider," he went on. " As I told you last night, there are hardly a dozen people in London who have heard of my first wife. I married Miss Houghton less than a year after your young mother's death. In the excitement and struggle of the early days of Buckley's I soon recovered from the loss of my girl-wife. That is to say, I never spoke of my loss, and I believed the child to be dead. New interests absorbed me. I had done with romance.

" Now, Chris, this is the point. How am I to tell the world—and by the world I mean the little bit of it we know—that you are my son ? How am I to account for your sudden appearance ? How am I to account for my ignorance of your very existence ?

" You can imagine the reception of such an interesting little bit of ' copy ' in Fleet Street. I have so many dear friends ! I belong to three clubs, besides holding prominent positions on any number of political and philanthropic bodies. I can't tell all these people Mrs. Christie's little tale. Of course they wouldn't believe it. We can guess what would be said. It will be an opportunity for humour, but I doubt whether it will be the kind of humour to appeal to my wife, for instance. Do you see what I mean ? "

" I see what you mean."

"Then give me your advice. Tell me what to do!"

Sir Charles threw himself back in his chair. The colour that had flushed his face died away. He suddenly looked old, and harassed, and very weary.

His companion bent forward and laid a hand upon his knee.

"Keep the secret!" said Felix Christie.

His father started and his face changed.

"I don't—quite understand you."

"Keep the secret," repeated Christie. "I make no claim upon you. I am indifferent to your money, and as for the baronetcy——"

He laughed, for the first time, with boyish mirth.

"Sir Charles, why should any one know of our relationship?" he went on steadily. "I can easily persuade Mrs. Christie to hold her tongue. She would do anything on earth for me. Silence can do my mother's memory no injury. I swear to you, on my part, never to speak of this again to any living soul. You were only my friend two days ago. I ask you to be my friend still, and nothing more."

"My good Chris!" exclaimed Sir Charles. "Have you considered the advantages you offer to resign so lightly? An assured position—wealth—influence——"

"Yes, I have considered these things," he answered. "There are several reasons for my rejection of them all. Houghton is my best friend. Do I want to displace Houghton? No!"

"He is just and fair-minded——" began Sir Charles.

"But he is ambitious," interrupted Christie. "And he is in love with Rosalind Pargetter. I owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Pargetter. We know him—dear old man—and we know that he has set his heart on his daughter marrying the eldest son of Sir Charles Buckley. That's a strong reason for keeping our secret. Then we must think of Lady Buckley."

"I never thought that my wife had any claims upon your consideration," said his father.

Christie smiled.

"I don't think I am a particular favourite of Lady Buckley's," he admitted. "But that has nothing to do with it. She probably forgets my existence between our meetings. Would she ever forgive me if I attempted to supplant Houghton—to push the heir even an inch from the throne? It would humble her pride and wound her heart. It would be cruel. I could never do it."

"But have you no thought for yourself?" asked Sir Charles, gently. "Are you only concerned for the feelings of others?"

"I don't think I need bother about myself," said Christie. "What shall I lose by keeping silent? Nothing! I am Houghton's brother, though he will never know it. I am your son, though I shall never call you father. I shall have paid a little of my debt to Mr. Pargetter. I tramped into London to make a name for Felix Christie. I'll be Felix Christie to the end of the chapter."

"My dear boy!" exclaimed Sir Charles; and then again, "My dear boy!"

"If ever you can help me in any way, I know I can rely upon your friendship," concluded Christie.

"There is one person to whom I must speak, in fairness to her and to myself," said his companion, after a pause, "that is my wife."

"Is it necessary to worry her——?" began Christie.

"It will not worry her in the least when she knows your decision," interrupted Sir Charles, with a smile. "She is every inch a Houghton, as I dare say you have heard her remark, and the members of that practical family never waste their energies in worrying over other people's business. She will consider your generous conduct your own private affair, not ours."

"Why tell her anything at all about it?"

"Because when two people have been married as long as Lady Buckley and I without any serious—how shall I put it?—well, the convenient phrase, incompatibility of

temper, will serve the purpose—there is a peculiar bond of confidence between them, Felix," replied Sir Charles. "They rely on each other's loyalty, and depend, in all serious matters, on mutual support and friendly agreement. This may sound a very tame substitute for the self-abandonment of love to a young man who is about to marry the sweetest girl in the world "—he smiled again and touched Christie's hand—" but it is worth having all the same. I will tell my wife what has passed between us. She will never speak of it."

It was impossible for Buckley to conceal the intense relief that he felt, for impatience and dislike of social embarrassments was one of the points of his many-sided character, although it was the thought of Houghton's surprise and possible regret that had weighed with him more heavily than anything else.

He was very proud of Houghton's many fine qualities, his charm and popularity, good sense, handsome presence, and practical ability ; but, as he looked at Felix Christie he was conscious of a subtle attraction, an appeal to his finer feelings and emotions, that his idolized boy had never awakened.

The same thought that had once occurred to Christie now passed, oddly enough, through his mind. Houghton was the son of his ambition and success ; Joe, of his whims and melancholy ; but Felix was the son of his highest thoughts.

The hour was late when they parted.

" Good night, Sir Charles ! "

" Good night, Felix ! "

For a moment the older man laid his hand on Christie's shoulder, looking at him very gravely, but not without a hint of humour in his eyes.

" I can't help thinking, Felix," he said in a low voice, " that if I am fated, at the end of life, to remember all my other errors and failures, they will be as nothing compared with the gigantic folly I am committing now."

"I don't understand you, Sir Charles."

"My dear boy, perhaps I am deliberately throwing away a chance of fame—to be known as your father!"

"Perhaps!" said Christie gaily, and he laughed and went away.

He shared Sir Charles Buckley's feeling of relief. The matter was settled. Houghton was safe.

Many a young man, as deeply in love, would have confided in his future wife before deciding to make no claim upon a rich and indulgent father. Christie knew what Pearl Henning would have said. That it did not enter his head to consult her showed, only too plainly, his knowledge of her character and the nature of the bond that was to hold them together. There had grown to be great reticence in his devotion, and an instinctive silence on the subjects that she did not understand or care to know.

His attitude towards his father and his father's son, Houghton Buckley, would have been incomprehensible to Pearl.

When Christie reached Drury Lane, after his memorable talk with Sir Charles, he was a little surprised to find Millidew at home. The friends had not seen much of each other during the past few weeks.

"Why, Ned!" he exclaimed, opening the door with his key. "Whatever are you doing?"

Millidew was standing on a chair, taking down the framed sketches and pictures off the wall on his side of the room.

"I didn't think you would be back so early," he answered, looking round at his friend with a flushed face.

"Early!" repeated Christie, smiling. "But what are you doing?"

Millidew stepped off the chair and carefully dusted the frame of a drawing he had just taken down.

"Fact is, Chris," he said, passing his dirty fingers through his lank, black hair, "I'm going to dispose of all this stuff. Sell it for what it's worth. I—I invited Old Sols to have a

look round the other day, when you were out, and he's agreed to take the whole lot off my hands."

Old Sols was one of Millidew's peculiar intimates, a Jew, dealer in pictures, old furniture, and curiosities.

"I say! You might have mentioned it to me," said Christie, looking at the bare walls a little ruefully.

"They're all my own property!" cried Millidew. "I suppose I can do what I like with them?"

"Of course you can, old man. Don't be ill-tempered," said Christie, mildly.

He sat down on the edge of the table, watching his companion.

Time had not improved the cartoonist. He had always been insignificant in height and figure, but now he looked sallow, unhealthy, deteriorated in every way.

Christie, living in the same house and blinded by his affection, had hardly noticed the gradual change for the worse in his appearance. He accepted Ned's faults and bad habits as inseparable from the man he had known and trusted for so long.

"Your lady-love has been here," said Millidew suddenly.

"Pearl!" exclaimed Christie. "When did she come? How long did she stop? Was my mother at home?"

"Your mother came home while she was here," answered Millidew, "but there wasn't a row."

His tone suggested a little disappointment. He did not understand the change in Mrs. Christie, for she had treated Felix's sweetheart with the greatest kindness.

"Did Pearl leave a note for me or give you any message?" asked the eager lover.

"She's going home for a month, as she wants a change. She thinks this weather is beastly. She returns, of course, to the Gambols. She only made up her mind yesterday, and as she starts early to-morrow, it's no use for you to try to see her. She'll write. Best love."

Thus Millidew, as if he were repeating a lesson.

"Is that all?" said Christie.

"I should think it was enough."

A month! He would not see her for the eternity of a month. Christie took no further interest in his friend. He sat down at his writing-table gloomily, longing for the wasted hours that he might have spent with Pearl.

"There's a letter for you," said Millidew after a while, tossing it from the mantelpiece towards him.

The envelope fell at his feet. He stooped and recognized Ettie Boscombe's writing.

There were only a few lines, concerning his book, on the small white sheet, but as he read them—tender, kind, sympathetic words!—her sweet and loyal friendship suddenly appealed to him in a new way.

He had never before compared her with Pearl, but a flash of intuition showed him, as he held her letter in his hand, that she was a woman who would have fulfilled all his deepest and highest hopes of love—but he adored Pearl! He could not live without her.

CHAPTER XXV

FELIX AND LADY BUCKLEY

"FELIX," said Mrs. Christie, "I'm going home right now!"

She made this announcement, after a long, meditative silence, walking with Christie in Hyde Park.

"Certainly. Let us go in the opposite direction, for every step on this particular road takes us farther from Drury Lane," he answered.

"When I say I am going home, sonny, I wasn't thinking of Drury Lane."

"Then where do you mean to go, my dear mother?"

He always called her mother, but there was a new tenderness in his voice as he spoke the word. She was so changed, so affectionate and gentle, that it seemed as if another woman had come into his house, for even her face had already lost some of its hard lines, her bearing was subdued, and her sharp voice vibrated with a new tone.

"I mean to go home to Mapleville, Felix."

"Mother!"

"Right now!" said Mrs. Christie again, as if they were standing on the quay and the ship about to sail.

"Are you tired of my society so soon?" he asked, smiling.

There was no need for her to answer. She put her hand through his arm, leaning a little on his support. How different from the Mrs. Christie of old days!

"The fact is, my dear, I'm not suited to a town like London," she continued. "I shall never get acquainted with your friends. We're not easy together. I don't understand half they say."

"Is that a good reason for leaving me, mother?" said Christie. "We are always happy together, you and I."

"When we're alone together, Felix," she answered emphatically. "You always talk to suit me. You kind of adapt yourself. I'd better go home. I've got my own house and I can keep it properly. I can't make that little store in Drury Lane fit to live in."

"We are not going to live in Drury Lane much longer, mother."

"I s'pose you mean to get married, Felix?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I could live with you and your wife? I guess I'm not such a ninny as that!"

"Near to us, mother."

She smiled a little grimly, shaking her head.

"The other side of the Atlantic Ocean will be near enough to suit Pearl."

"Oh, mother!"

The hint of reproach in his voice moved her to quick remorse.

"I'm not sayin' a word against your best girl, Felix," she hastened to add, "but it's only natural her ways should be different from mine."

"You will not live in the same house. Your 'ways,' dear, need not clash," he said affectionately.

"I'm afraid the same town isn't big enough to hold me and Pearl, sonny."

"Isn't it, mother?" he asked, laughing.

"Not when you're married, Felix. I shouldn't mean to interfere, but I know how it would be. I know these——" She stopped abruptly, having almost spoken the forbidden words, "bouncin' blondes."

"Then what do you propose to do, mother?"

"Go right back to Mapleville, Felix."

"I am afraid you'll be very lonely."

"Some! But that can't be helped."

"It can be helped, if you remain in this country."

Mrs. Christie was silent for a few minutes, staring with her dark eyes into the leafy distance of the park. He saw, glancing at her face, the shadow of the old repression pass over it, but the touch of his hand and the consciousness of his gaze instantly revived her better self.

" Let us sit down under the trees, Felix, and I'll tell you just how I feel about goin' back to Canada," she said.

They sat down under the trees. She did not speak at once, but looked on the ground with a very thoughtful, slightly puzzled expression, as if she could not find words.

" It's this way, Felix," she said at last. " I feel I've got to work out my repentance."

" My dear mother, that is too severe a word," he replied. " I can't let you use it without a protest. After all, what is there to repent ? No harm is done."

" What is there to repent, Felix ? " she repeated, with the severity of her early days, but not directed towards him. " Hasn't my life been an acted lie ? Haven't I spoiled your prospects and deeply wronged—Charles Buckley ? "

She remembered her promise never to say the words " your father."

" My prospects need not trouble you in the least. I have said so a hundred times. Let me entreat you, mother, not to harp upon old strings. They are all out of tune. Forget them ! "

" Can I forget the habits and ways of twenty years ? They must be recalled, not forgotten, before I can forgive myself. I wish I could remember all the hard and unkind thoughts, and repent of them one by one."

" My dear mother, what a morbid wish ! You would turn this bright world into a huge confessional."

" I can't help that, Felix. It's my way. Knowledge of sin—repentance—reparation. That's what I've got to think about. You needn't be scared that I'm goin' to brood over what is done and can't be undone."

" It's a temptation, mother," said Christie, smiling at her doubtfully. " And it's a most insidious one."

"Less likely at home, Felix, than in London."

"How can you say so? You will be shut up in your little house, all alone——"

"Haven't I got my friends? Aren't there a pack o' children in our street? Isn't there chapel work and visitin' the sick?"

"You did all these things before, with the exception of making friends with children, mother."

"But I did 'em in a different spirit, Felix. I did 'em in wrath and bitterness of heart. I was always respected by my neighbours, wasn't I?" with a little anxiety in her tone.

"I am sure of it, mother."

"But nobody loved me. I knew it. They never wanted my company. They invited me to their houses as a duty."

"My poor mother!"

"It used to hurt me, Felix, but I didn't let on, and at the same time I was so contrary in mind that I liked 'em to be unkind and neglectful. It was another grievance. But that feeling's all gone; all gone, Felix."

She patted his hand, looking at him quietly with tears in her eyes.

"I've got to make all our old friends fond o' me. That will be one of the works of my repentance. I've got to hear the merry voices of little boys and girls runnin' in to visit me, or playin' on the porch. I've got to feel their arms round my neck, and make 'em think I'm like a mother, though I've never been one.

"I've got to learn to be contented with my life," she went on. "Contented with the past, as well as the present. That will be the hardest task of all, Felix. I've got to be humble and make my home."

"Dearest mother!"

"I shall think of you every day, Felix, and boast likely enough of your wonderful books, for I s'pose you'll keep on book-writin'?"

"I suppose so, mother."

"I shall read them all—evenings, when I've got through my work—and try to follow your thoughts and understand what you mean by your queer views of life and religion. They're so different from mine. They seem so simple, but so grand. What you write is like yourself, Felix, just quiet and kind, as if you didn't know you were putting new ideas into people's minds.

"You've altered everything in the world to me. I used to see a peculiar look in your eyes when you were a little boy—a kind o' thoughtful, wise look—but then I was afraid of it, for it made me ashamed. Now it makes me happy. It makes me whole."

"It's very dear of you to say this, mother."

"So you see why I want to go back to Mapleville, Felix," she continued. "It is for your sake, sonny, as well as my own. Maybe some day, when you want a real quiet, dull holiday, you'll pay me a visit. I want you to feel that you're comin' home. I want you to feel as if your mother was really there. I shall live for that day and pray to see it dawn, every mornin' and every night."

Mrs. Christie's departure from England was almost as sudden as her arrival. Good luck attended her desire to be gone, for Felix was able to obtain a ticket, returned at the eleventh hour, for a ship sailing to Montreal only a few days after their talk in Hyde Park.

He did not attempt to alter her determination. He knew her too well and realized, although he would not confess it, that Pearl's only feeling at her departure would be one of relief.

Ettie Boscombe was the only one of Christie's friends who said good-bye to Mrs. Christie with any regret.

Mrs. Boscombe openly rejoiced, but there had been a strange sympathy from the first between her daughter and the stern New England woman. Perhaps, although she never put it into words, Mrs. Christie divined the secret of Ettie's life.

Felix felt very lonely after his mother had gone.

Millidew, rich with the money he had received from Old Sols, neglected his friend and only returned to Drury Lane to sleep, spending his days and half his nights with the chosen companions of his worst moods.

Houghton and Joe Buckley were out of town. Mr. Ferguson, whose friendship with Christie grew stronger every year, was spending his annual holiday in Scotland.

Pearl, who "loathed" writing letters as much as she "loved" receiving them, answered his long, rambling pages with hurried messages on picture post cards, showing more than once that she had not troubled to read what he had written.

She ignored the subject of their marriage, but it was never absent from Christie's mind. He had saved enough money, not to fulfil his dreams of giving Pearl all that she desired, but to satisfy her wishes. He had great hopes of his book, but his growing reputation as a writer of light essays appealed to his future wife in the practical form of immediate cheques. She was proud of so often seeing his name in print, but secretly amazed at the increasing money value of his work.

It really made her almost agree, although she did not say so, with the dictum of her friend, Mr. Albert Gambol: "There is only one idiot greater than the man who spends his life in scribbling, and that's the one who pays him to do it."

Christie could have spent all his lonely hours, had he chosen, under the hospitable roof of the Chippetts, but perpetual elocutionary efforts have an irritating effect on the most serene disposition. Elocution was responsible for the hurried marriage of Victor Browne and Euterpe.

"If I had had to listen to the dad's recitations for many more weeks I should have gone mad and choked him!" Victor confided to Christie.

"Mr. Chippett has introduced dear Victor to all the poets!" was Mrs. Chippett's happier description of the family's intellectual evenings.

It was therefore decided that the engagement should be shortened from six months to three. It was characteristic of Mrs. Chippett, once the most determined opposer of the match, to persuade herself and everybody else that she had always favoured the suit of Victor Browne. He became a great favourite at Ye Lair, with occasional skirmishes to break the monotony of his visits, and was generally mentioned by his future mother-in-law as her tower of strength or her right hand.

"When I think of our Edgar's fire, spirituality, and professional zeal, and then of our Victor's solid, practical qualities, I doubt if the mother of the Gracchi had more reason to be proud of her boys!" became one of Mrs. Chippett's favourite speeches.

Christie, his book finished, tried to amuse himself in the absence of Pearl by visiting his friends, but he was unusually restless, and, perhaps for the only time in his life, so easily bored that the shortest visit was all too long.

He went to the theatre, lounged about the parks and streets, occasionally rowed on the river, but more frequently wandered along the towing-path, mentally weary, but physically untired and untiring for hour after hour of the listless day.

A happy inspiration made him invite Ettie Boscombe to bear him company on one of these hitherto profitless expeditions.

They talked of Pearl and of his book, with long intervals of silence. The great unrest and depression from which he had suffered so keenly passed away. He was gradually restored to himself.

He thought of Ettie very often, when they were apart from each other, wondering at the place he had discovered she held in his heart, for all his love, as youth knows love, was given to another woman.

He had long relied on Ettie's judgment and sympathy, but to admire her—to remember that she was a young girl as well as an old friend—was a new experience, and it

surprised him a little, for his loyalty to Pearl was as passionate as his love. There was no change in his relationship to Ettie in word or deed, but he was conscious of a subtle attraction and appeal that he had never known in the old days.

He longed for the day of Pearl's return, for he had determined to win her consent to an early marriage. He knew the strength of his own will, but his influence over her was always weakened by absence.

Christie had not seen Sir Charles Buckley since the night of their talk at the Belvoir Club, but he had received a letter from Lady Buckley, somewhat to his surprise, inviting him to call upon her.

He accepted the invitation, although he had never passed beyond the barrier, with his father's wife, that divided Grosvenor Square from Buckley's in the City.

He had always felt that he was tolerated, not welcomed, as one of dear Houghton's peculiar friends, and he did not believe that her knowledge of his birth would make any difference in her attitude towards him. He was inclined to agree with Sir Charles that Lady Buckley would probably ignore the incident, with the pride and prudence of the Houghton family, and school herself to forget that it had ever threatened danger to her favourite son.

Received by Court, the heavy butler, whose manner graciously acknowledged that they had frequently met before, Christie was shown into Lady Buckley's private room—boudoir is too soft a word—which the ordinary "young man from Buckley's" was never invited to enter.

The room was characteristic of its mistress. All the furniture was solid and handsome. The big writing-table, with its neat arrangement of papers and ticketed pigeonholes, looked more suitable for an office than the purposes of a lady's correspondence. Debrett and "Who's Who" were the most interesting books on her shelves.

There was a typewriter in her secretary's corner of the room, its table piled with circulars to be addressed and

posted on behalf of one of the many charities in which she was interested.

Quantities of roses, Lady Buckley's favourite flowers, compensated for the dullness of their surroundings. The only pictures on the walls were several delicate water-colours of her garden in Herefordshire, and a fine engraving of the well-known portrait of her husband.

There were many photographs of Houghton and Joe dotted about the room, but the place of honour on top of the desk was given to a large picture of the three generations of the Royal Family, King Edward, King George, and the Prince of Wales, in a broad silver frame.

Lady Buckley, accompanied by her animated ball of fluff, the pet Pomeranian, entered the room with her slow, dragging step, and greeted Christie in her usual manner, as if it were an effort to speak.

It struck him, not for the first time, that her shrewd, bright glance, and the firm grip of her big hand, were more truly indicative of her real character than the affected voice and the languid movements.

If Christie had wondered, before he arrived, why she had sent for him, his wonder increased during the call.

She did not betray, by the slightest word or change of expression at their meeting, the knowledge that he knew she possessed. She spoke of her husband as if he were still a comparative stranger to the young man, and mentioned Houghton and Joe as " my sons," as if they, too, were almost unknown to their brother.

It was an effort for Christie to remember that he was sitting in her private room, an invited guest. She made him feel apologetic, for all her courtesy, and as if he had no right to be there. A self-conscious or a conceited man would have been ill at ease, in the peculiar circumstances, but Christie was only puzzled.

The story of his father's first marriage appeared to him, in that room, like an impossible romance, a beautiful unwritten poem, far from the comprehension and sympathy

of Lady Buckley. He could not help wondering what she thought of it all. The question even passed through his mind whether Sir Charles had told her the truth.

Their conversation, rippling lightly over the deep waters of their secret thoughts, passed from one topic to another, finally splashing into party politics. Then Lady Buckley talked well, with no more animation than formerly, but with the decision, the unfailing good temper and cheerful disregard of her opponent's arguments that make for success in such discussions.

It occurred to Christie, after a while, that his visit had been prolonged beyond the conventional limit for an afternoon call—his ignorance on the subject would have enraged Pearl Henning—but Lady Buckley did not allow him to go. She highly appreciated such a good listener, rang for tea, and told the servants that she was not at home to any other visitors.

When their talk of parliamentary topics of the hour had made a conversational circle, returning to the main point from which it had started, Lady Buckley touched on a private matter.

"You know Mr. and Mrs. Pargetter, don't you, Mr. Christie?" she said.

Without waiting for an answer she rose, opened a drawer in her writing-table, and passed him a small photograph. It was a snapshot of Rosalind Pargetter on horseback, erect, handsome, faultlessly habited—Diana up to date.

"One of Houghton's attempts," said Lady Buckley. "I think it is very successful, but then he is successful in whatever he undertakes. Do you like Miss Pargetter?"

"Very much, Lady Buckley."

"So does Houghton, and one can rely upon his good taste and good sense absolutely," said Houghton's mother. "In fact, we are all attached to Rosalind. Sir Charles raves about her, positively raves."

Christie smiled at the idea of Sir Charles raving about anything.

" Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Pargetter are very pleased at the idea of an engagement between their girl and our son. This is strictly in confidence, Mr. Christie, between ourselves."

" Then it has come to an engagement ? " he asked.

" I think so," she replied in a more than usually slow drawl. " I—think—so. But it is still supposed to be their own little secret. Mrs. Pargetter tells me that it is as much as she can do to keep her husband from bursting into congratulations. You know how demonstrative dear Henry Pargetter is !

" Now, it would be absurd to disguise from you, Mr. Christie, that Houghton has much to offer. I believe that Joe is his father's favourite son, but his generous intentions with regard to Houghton, when the dear boy marries, will surprise even Mr. Pargetter."

Christie expressed his pleasure. He was at a loss to understand the reason of Lady Buckley's confidence. She guessed his thoughts.

" I tell you all this, Mr. Christie, because I know that you are greatly interested in both my sons."

" I am very fond of Joe, and I look upon Houghton as my best friend," he answered simply.

He rose from his chair, certain this time that his call was too prolonged, and held out his hand.

" Good-bye ! " said Lady Buckley, smiling as she spoke at the flurry of the Pom, awakened from a nap by the brush of her skirt. " Good-bye ! I am so pleased to have seen you."

She laid her hand on the bell, but paused, and took a quick step towards her guest, who was already at the door.

" Mr. Christie ! I have something more to say to you."

There was no change in her voice, but he knew, before the next words were spoken, that the closed page of his life was to be re-opened.

" There is a certain subject, my husband tells me, that you have decided not to discuss," she said, " but you must

not think I am indifferent or callous, Mr. Christie. I sent for you to say this."

"It was unnecessary, Lady Buckley, but I appreciate your kindness."

"My kindness!" she repeated in a low voice, perhaps remembering the day when she first saw him outside her house and refused to know him. "I want you to understand that you will always be a welcome guest in this house. It is your right to come here as often as you choose."

"I have waived the right," he answered gently. "This —forbidden subject need not give you a minute's anxiety or annoyance. It makes no difference to my gratitude for Sir Charles's friendship and your hospitality."

"Do you think I am so insensible to your love for Houghton? Do you think I can part from you on terms like this?"

The words were quick and impulsive. Tears started into her eyes. She put her hands on his shoulders, looking at him reproachfully.

"My dear Lady Buckley—if you care to see me now and then——" he said, inexpressibly touched and surprised.

She instantly regained her self-possession, but still kept her hands on his shoulders.

"You must come whenever you can, because we want you, all of us. Promise me you will, Chris!"

It was the first time she had ever called him by his short name.

"That is an easy promise," he answered, with a smile.

"And remember," she said, with a return to the dragging voice, "I shall always be to you, in my grateful heart, what I am to-day."

Then she put her arms round his neck, as proudly and tenderly as if he were her own son, and kissed his cheek.

That hour, although he never spoke of it again, was one of the most cherished memories of Christie's youth.

CHAPTER XXVI

CHRISTIE AND PEARL

CHRISTIE'S life and career, swinging on from event to event, many of them apparently trifling as they passed, had reached a point when all desire and ambition were centred in the realization of his long dream.

He was in a position to marry at last, and weary of the uncertainty that had shadowed even the happiest days of his engagement.

He believed that Pearl Henning, in spite of her inconsistencies and evasions, loved him. It was the conviction of his inmost heart, and in urging her to become his wife he imagined that her happiness, as well as his own, would be attained.

This was not altogether her fault, but in consequence of the transparent honesty of his disposition, measuring her devotion by his own.

While he knew that she did not understand or take any real interest in his work, his imagination endowed her with the finest qualities of love—sincerity and depth—and he trusted her as absolutely as if they were already married.

It was in this spirit of confidence that he went to Pearl, the day after her return to London, to urge the fulfilment of their pledge to each other.

The surroundings of the Gambol household had always jarred upon him, but it was one of the many feelings he suppressed in her company.

Her greeting, after so long an absence, was almost cruel in its carelessness, but that, too, he had grown accustomed to expect.

She looked at him critically, hardly approvingly, until the admiration and delight in his eyes won her, as the flattering mirror always did, to smiles. She looked very lovely, more like a full-blown flower than ever after her country holiday.

"What makes you so horridly pale and worn-looking, Chris?" was her first question.

"So you've got your silly old book finished at last! How much do you think it will fetch?" was her second.

They were sitting side by side on the plush-covered sofa in Miss Gambol's drawing-room, Pearl with her cheek against his shoulder. She was like a love-bird, content to remain in the same position, without speaking, for any length of time.

"I wish you had read my book, angel," he said.

"Of course I mean to read it when it's in print," she answered. "I always go to sleep over typewriting. It makes such dull reading, don't it?"

"I could read it aloud to you, Pearl."

"Yes, that would be lovely, some time later on, when the evenings begin to close in. It's nice to be out of doors in this weather, isn't it, listening to a band?"

"We may be in our own house by the time the evenings begin to close in."

She gave him a quick glance, then nestled a little closer.

"Why are you always dropping hints like that, Chris? You know we can't afford to get married. What's the use?"

"But I think we can afford it, my Pearl."

He shifted his position so that he could study her face, and told her, briefly and clearly, all his affairs.

It was the most business-like talk they had ever had. She listened attentively, her smooth forehead puckered into a frown. Her questions were shrewd and sensible. She was grave, cool, calculating. He was captivated by this unexpected display of common sense, never having seen her so thoughtful and absorbed in anything he said.

What a wife for a good man of business, he thought. It was one of Christie's delusions that he himself was a good man of business. She lost all resemblance to a love-bird. Marriage was the subject in hand, and marriage, as Pearl well knew, was a question of ways and means, expenses and responsibilities, nothing whatever to do with sentiment.

She knew Christie well enough to realize that he was in earnest. There was a subtle difference in his voice and manner. He had changed from the mere lover into the definite future husband. His tenderness and consideration were as marked as they had always been, but she felt that their old relations were broadened; she had become his partner, and could play with him no longer. Again and again she had vowed she loved him, and he believed her.

Pearl Henning was one of those women who look upon all sins in their own sex—except one—as justifiable and reasonable in their dealings with men. She had lied to him for so long that it was impossible to speak the truth now. How often had she declared that poverty, with him, would be easy to bear? How often had she protested that he was the only man she would ever marry?

These recollections, rushing over her, filled Pearl, not with remorse, but with impotent rage at her own stupidity, for he had faithfully fulfilled all her conditions.

It was in his power to earn the income she had named as a necessity, to take the style of house she had professed to covet, to assure her of the gratification of every expressed desire.

"I suppose we shall live very quietly?" she queried.

"Just as you like, dearest," he answered. "I have a great many friends, and it is quite possible to enjoy oneself without much money."

"You clever men are very unpractical!" exclaimed Pearl. "How can you entertain your friends if you're poor?"

"Ned and I have managed it in Drury Lane."

"That isn't what I call entertaining!" with a little laugh of contempt. "When you've got a house you must have real suppers, with wine, and chicken sandwiches, and jellies and ices."

"That doesn't sound impossible, Pearl."

"Then you ought to have a waiter," she continued; "and decorations; and a girl to help the ladies take off their cloaks."

"My dear child, you dazzle me with the prospect of these splendours!" cried Christie, laughing. "It isn't necessary to arrange the details of our balls and receptions just now."

"These are only a few of the expenses we must look forward to," Pearl went on gloomily. "I shall have to dress well. An author's wife has really got to be more particular in every way than other people, if she wants to get on."

"Why, dear?"

"To make people respect her husband. Nobody thinks much of authors."

"Don't they, Pearl?"

"Not practical, business-like people. Mr. Gambol, for instance, says that a tuppenny-ha'penny writer is really outside the pale of good society. Of course I don't mean that you're only a tuppenny-ha'penny writer, Chris, but I'm telling you what he says. After all, he knows the world."

"But I don't think we need be troubled over Mr. Gambol's opinion, dearest."

"No, I s'pose not!" with a toss of her head. "But I want you to consider the difficulties. We must have a servant, Chris. I never cared about domestic work. That's one of the chief reasons why I learned the hairdressing—to get away from home. You know, we're such a big family. Then, if there's a garden to our house, it means having a man or a boy once a week. I don't like the bother of gardening, and you're not used to it. What about furnishing? We don't want to buy a lot of odd

things. The proper way is to go to some big shop and let them do it for you. They know what's in good taste, and it's much better to leave it all to them."

"Dear love!" exclaimed Christie, touching a little ring of hair over her ear. "These are all details. We haven't settled the two main points. When can we be married and where are we to live?"

Pearl answered the second question.

"I like the West End, but I s'pose that's impossible. Bayswater is really the nicest part of London. We must try to get a flat. Of course they're poky, flats are, but that doesn't matter if you're in a good street. I know they're expensive, but not if you take a basement——"

"Oh, Pearl, we couldn't live underground!" he interrupted.

"They've always got electric light," said Pearl. "I shouldn't mind that at all."

"But I love to see you in the sunshine!" he exclaimed.

"Now do be sensible!" said Pearl, after a brief interval of love-making.

She put her hands on his chest, looking at him critically.

"Well, you don't look much like a bridegroom," she said. "You're awfully thin and lank, Chris. Your eyes are so solemn, even when you smile, that they frighten me."

"Dearest!"

"I wonder how I shall like you if we do get married?"

"If?" he repeated reproachfully.

"I wonder whether you'll really suit me," she went on, more as if she were talking to herself or thinking aloud.

"I will do everything in a man's power, darling, to make you happy," he answered, earnestly.

"You mustn't expect me to be—too literary, will you, Chris?"

"No; one literary person is enough in a house," he said.

"Because I can't take any interest in the same things as you do," she said, with a sudden impulse to be candid.

"To be quite honest, Chris, you and your friends, when you get jawing, bore me frightfully. I hate serious conversation, and I never understand your jokes. I hate jokes!"

"You hate so many things, Pearl," he protested.

"Yes, I do!" she said. "I don't see any sense in your ideas of tolerance. Why should we love our enemies? Why should we always return good for evil? That's not the way to get on in the world."

"All right, dear! You needn't be angry with me about it," said Christie, mildly.

"That's the way you always put me off!" cried the girl, who was excited by their previous talk. "You never will argue the point. You treat me like a child."

"My dear girl, I've heard you say dozens and dozens of times that arguing any point is one of the things that you really do hate," said Christie. "I don't mean to treat you like a child."

"You don't want to get on in the world, that's the real truth of the matter," she continued, ignoring his words. "You're anxious enough to get married, because you happen to have fallen in love with me; but you're utterly indifferent about everything else. You don't care what sort of a house we get, or how it is furnished, or whether I am satisfied with your income."

"Pearl! Dearest! Do I deserve these reproaches?" he asked, surprised at the outburst.

"You're a crank, that's what's the matter with you," said Pearl more quietly, but in a tone of conviction, as if she were diagnosing a dangerous case. "You have no idea of proportion——"

"Where did you pick up that expression, Pearl?" said Christie in a parenthesis.

"You attach no importance to the really important things of life, Chris."

"Tell me some of the really important things in life, angel, then I shall know whether you are right."

"You know very well what I mean without explanations," rejoined the angel severely.

"No, Pearl; I want you to tell me."

"Well, success—position—money—all the things you scoff at, you and your friends."

"You are very hard upon me and my friends," observed Christie. "Are you speaking of Ned Millidew? He would agree with you, I am sure. So would Houghton Buckley, and Arthur Brant, and Tom Pelly, and——"

"Oh, you're picking out the few sensible fellows in the whole lot."

"Well, dearest, I am not responsible for the others' opinions," he urged. "Why do we talk of them at all? We want to talk about ourselves and our marriage."

With his arms again round her, his voice whispering in her ear, Pearl was unable to resist the appeal.

"Oh, Chris," she said tearfully, "I wish you were always like this! I wish you were an ordinary man."

"What do you mean, my love? I'm a very ordinary man," he answered, with a smile.

"Oh no! You're generally up in the clouds."

"That's just what Ned says."

"Ned Millidew? Don't quote him to me!"

She recovered quickly from her emotion, wiped her eyes carefully, and straightened her eyebrows with the tips of her fingers.

"Ned Millidew!" she repeated, scornfully. "He's a traitor. A mean little wretch!"

"My dear Pearl, Ned was the first friend I made in London. Why do you speak of him so unkindly?"

"You're blind, Chris! You seem to think every man is like yourself. What would you say if I was to tell you that Millidew is always disparaging you behind your back?"

"I should say you were exaggerating one of old Ned's peculiarities, dear. He doesn't flatter me to my face."

"Well, what would you say if he mocked at the idea of

our marriage and told me you were in debt and deceiving me about your prospects ? "

" Ned was joking, Pearl. You don't know him," said her lover, calmly.

" Was it a joke to make friends with Miss Gambol, so that he could come here to see us without telling you ? Was it a joke to try to persuade me to meet him on the sly ? Is it a joke to make love to me whenever we're alone for a minute ? "

" If Ned has been guilty of these things——" began Christie, incredulously, but with his colour mounting.

" Do you think I'm a liar ? " cried Pearl.

" No—no ! "

She was amazed at the effect of her words, having always regarded Christie, except when he was making love, as a dreamy, phlegmatic kind of fellow, who cared as little for his friends as he did for money.

He was very angry or terribly shocked—she could not tell which—by her exposure of his friend. He left her side and walked up and down the room, his arms folded, his frowning gaze bent upon the floor.

Pearl, with the instinct of a coward who dares not face the consequences of his own folly, instantly tried to retrieve her false step. Her quick excuses, however, only increased his anger.

" You needn't fly into a rage, Chris," she said. " There's nothing to make a fuss about. Don't be stupid. The man couldn't help admiring me, I suppose ; but I wish I hadn't told you."

" You ought to have told me long ago," he answered shortly.

She gave an affected little laugh.

" I like your cheek ! Don't you trust me ? It's a fine thing if I've got to run to Drury Lane every time a man speaks to me civilly, or pays me a harmless little compliment."

"If there had been no more in it than that——" he began.

She sprang to her feet and ran up to him, seizing upon his arm.

"Of course there isn't any more in it than that!" she said, taking his hand. "But I wanted to warn you about Millidew. He was only flirting. I was an idiot to speak of it. You're not angry with me now, are you, darling?"

"I am never angry with you," he said very tenderly, "and I would have trusted Ned's loyalty against the world."

"He wasn't serious, Chris. I tell you, he was only flirting."

"Does that make it any better, Pearl? Your defence is worse than my accusation. If I thought he loved you I should be intensely sorry, but I couldn't blame him; but, as it is, he has played with the reality of love—unfair to you, false to me."

"Oh, Chris, you're so in earnest! Don't you understand a man like Ned Millidew? It's always some girl or another. He's that kind!"

"I know! I know!" said Christie, hurt in a subtle way, not so much by her actual words, but by the knowledge of his friend that the tone implied.

"Then why be so annoyed? I've told him a dozen times that he's a traitor. He doesn't care! I hate him! You needn't give it a second thought. I wish I hadn't told you. Are you going to be frightfully jealous of all the men who look at me after we're married?"

She spoke lightly enough, but was conscious of a feeling of excitement, approaching fear. Never, during the whole time of their engagement, had she seen her lover so strongly moved.

"Dearest! dearest!" he said, and held her hands against his breast, then kissed them and pressed them again to his heart. "Tell me that you love me!"

"You know I do!" said Pearl, vehemently. "You ought to trust me, Chris."

He looked at her in silence for a minute before he answered, self-reproach sweeping over him.

"I have always trusted you, Pearl," then he said slowly, "I will always trust you."

Always! Always! The words rang in her ears, finding a dread echo in her heart.

She repeated the old, accustomed vows of young lovers. It was settled, within a couple of weeks, when they would be married.

Christie was exuberant. Pearl was oddly depressed. They parted on the fondest terms, but she refused to take him to the door.

"Miss Gambol may spy on us," she said.

It hardly seemed a good reason, for Pearl hung over the banisters to see him go. His hand was on the door when she called him back.

"Chris! A moment——"

He would have returned to her side, but she checked him by a slight gesture on the flight of stairs below the one where she was standing. Then, bending down so that her hair shadowed her face and his, kissed him again.

"Good-bye, dear," she whispered.

"Good-bye, my Pearl! My love! Till to-morrow!" said Christie.

"To-morrow!" repeated Pearl.

CHAPTER XXVII

A FEW WORDS WITH MR. GAMBOL

WHEN Pearl returned to the empty drawing-room, closing the door behind her, she quickly recovered from the excitement and emotion of their long talk.

Carefully moving the ornaments out of the way, she leaned her elbows on the mantelpiece and looked at herself thoughtfully in the glass.

Contemplating her own beauty—studying it, thinking about it, learning every line and every tiny mark on her face by heart—was an unending source of entertainment to Pearl.

She seriously wondered, every day of her life, if there could be anything more lovely than her own blue eyes and white throat, except the blue eyes and white throats of other fair women, for she was too sensible, in spite of her vanity, to imagine herself the only beauty in the world.

After her parting with Christie, however, the reflection did not smile its admiration as complacently as usual. He had made her realize her position. She was not altogether sorry. Mr. Gambol had been treating her with apparent indifference since her return to his house from her country holiday.

His greeting had been friendly, but formal. He had made no effort to see her alone. He was even more bland and good-tempered than of old, and his sister had been the recipient of several unexpected presents during Pearl's absence.

At times he was abstracted and absent-minded. If the girl had not caught him furtively watching her, when he

thought he was unobserved, she would have believed that their long-drawn-out, somewhat dull flirtation had only existed in her own imagination.

She was piqued, but not really angry, for she knew that Mr. Gambol, unlike Edward Millidew, had paid her the compliment, while it lasted, of sincere admiration.

He had never treated her with Millidew's impudent assurance, reading her character like an easy book.

Re-arranging Miss Gambol's precious ornaments on the mantelpiece, when she was tired for the time being of looking in the glass, Pearl went downstairs to find her hostess. Her restlessness and excitement had unaccountably returned. Being alone in a room was another of the many things she hated.

Instead of Miss Gambol, whom she had expected to find in the dining-room, Pearl burst in upon that lady's brother. He was sitting at the table, writing letters. His attitude and occupation alike surprised her, for he was generally engaged in the shop during the late afternoon.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Gambol!" she exclaimed, involuntarily drawing back. "I was looking for your sister."

He looked at her vaguely for a second, as she hesitated at the door, as if his mind had not grasped the meaning of her hurried speech. Then he smiled and waved his pen towards a chair opposite his own.

"Always welcome, Miss Margrit. Come in! Be seated."

"I don't want to interrupt you."

"Not at all. My sister has gone out. She asked me to tell you, if you inquired, that she will not be in before supper. She has gone to drink tea with Mrs. Cole. As Mr. Christie was with you in the drawing-room, she did not care to enter."

"It wouldn't have mattered in the least," said Pearl.

She sat down in the chair indicated by Mr. Gambol and took up a newspaper lying on the table.

Without another word passing between them she knew

that they were on the old terms. She was restored to favour.

Mr. Gambol was a slow, careful writer, proud of his flourishes and copper-plate capital letters. Pearl observed that his expression was particularly amiable, and there was a fresh flower in his buttonhole.

She did not read the newspaper, for her thoughts were all of Felix Christie and the talk of their marriage. She considered him much too sanguine, absurdly sanguine, over the future.

His small capital would soon be exhausted. She had already spent the few pounds in imagination.

What did he possess, when all was said and done? What was to be the source of their income? A pen, a bottle of ink, and a ream of paper! It was too ridiculous!

She glanced round the comfortable room. There would be so many things to buy. Poor Chris was so ignorant of the realities of life—the cost of dining-room furniture, for example—the things that really mattered.

Mr. Gambol, having finished his two letters and folded them into their envelopes, leaned back in his chair with a smile of relief and turned his attention to Pearl. She had rarely seen him so obviously happy and self-satisfied. He positively beamed upon her, but she was a little surprised at his first question.

"Well, Miss Margrit, how was our romantic young friend?"

"Do you mean Felix Christie, Mr. Gambol?"

"To be sure! To be sure!"

Pearl shrugged her shoulders and pursed her lips.

"Oh, he was very well," she answered, with indifference.

"Made his fortune yet out of little tales?"

"Not yet."

"Poor fellow!" continued Mr. Gambol, twisting his late wife's wedding-ring round and round his thick little finger. "I can't help pitying a clever young man—for he is undoubtedly clever in his little way—wasting his time in such an unprofitable business."

"Some authors become very rich," observed Pearl.

"Very true," assented her companion. "But they are not men of our young friend's stamp. They are men who can gauge popular taste. Everything is reduced to a money basis in these days. There are only two important questions in our modern life—Does it pay? Will it sell?"

This speech did not jar upon the girl. She nodded agreement with Mr. Gambol, and he continued in soliloquy.

"To attain success in literature [he called it literychur] it is necessary for a man to be versatile. He must write all styles to suit all publics. We don't want specializing nowadays. Same with business. A man must have a finger in other men's pies. Take my own case. Should I have been in my present position financially if I'd confined my talents to hair? Hair's all very well in its way"—he passed his hand over his own sleek head—"but you can't make any money out of it, beyond a bare subsistence."

"Can't you?" asked Pearl, concealing the curiosity that these unexpected hints at confidence aroused.

He laughed indulgently.

"Silly girl!" he said. "Do you think a hairdresser, who only attends to his own business, could afford a cottage in the country, if he chose to have one, or a pony and trap, or a trip to the Continent for his holidays?"

"Why not?" said Pearl.

"Because he don't make enough money," said Mr. Gambol, who had expected her to be dazzled by such a list of golden possibilities. "He can only live in tiptop style by judicious extension of his sphere of activity."

This was a good phrase. He repeated it more slowly.

"Judicious extension of his sphere of activity. That is what I have done, Miss Margrit."

"I hope successfully, Mr. Gambol?"

He thought it a good opportunity to repeat another of his former speeches.

"No mere hairdresser could afford a cottage in the

country, or a pony and trap, or trips to the Continent, but all these things are within the bounds of possibility with me."

"I congratulate you, I'm sure!"

She extended her hand across the table. He pressed it warmly in both of his. They smiled at each other in a very cordial manner. There was silence for a second, then Pearl tried to withdraw her hand and half rose from her chair, but he held her fingers by force. She sat down again.

"Please, Mr. Gambol!" she said, plaintively.

He laughed and pretended to examine her rings.

"Oh, please, Mr. Gambol!"

Then Mr. Gambol deliberately pulled her round the table until she was standing beside him. Pearl was really angry. Her face flushed and she stamped her foot, trying with all the strength of her free hand to push away the arm he had slipped round her waist.

"Miss Margrit! I want this dear little hand for my own!" said the hairdresser.

He liked her the better for her anger, for it gave him an excuse to hold her firmly. He, too, had risen from his chair. They looked at each critically, at close quarters.

"There! There! Don't be silly," said Mr. Gambol quietly and decisively. "I want you to be my little wife."

"No!" cried Pearl.

Her voice was shrill and incredulous. She stared at him in blank amazement. The idea of a serious proposal of marriage from Mr. Gambol would have struck her, five minutes before, as improbable and absurd.

He had never been jealous of Christie; he had never taken the initiative in their mild flirtation; he was twice her age.

If the thought had once passed through her mind that he might propose to her, common sense and her personal experience of men had denied the possibility.

Pearl had had several lovers, but they had all been young

men. She had not reckoned on Mr. Gambol's prudence. He had kept retreat open by hiding his real feelings, and, although his words were apparently impulsive, he had been coolly waiting an opportunity to say them ever since her return to London. The house had been very dull without her.

He had often contemplated a second marriage, the wife of his imagination being a sensible, middle-aged woman, good-looking, of course; the daily companionship of Miss Pearl Henning had opened his eyes to other possibilities—a wife whose youth would renew his own, whose beauty would make other men envious, and whose character he could hope to mould to his ideal of woman, an echo and reflection of the particular man who happened to be her husband.

Pearl was not at all the girl to fulfil this last requirement, but Mr. Gambol was sufficiently in love to be slightly mistaken in the young lady, for all his penetration.

"Mr. Gambol! Do you mean it?" she asked after her first exclamation.

"I am not in the habit of making false statements," he replied, with an attempt at playfulness. "If I say that I want to win a certain little hand, I certainly mean it."

"But I never dreamed——" began Pearl.

"Of course you didn't!" he interrupted. "Though you must have seen that I was very attracted by a certain small person from the beginning of her visit, eh?"

"I knew you liked me," said Pearl emphatically.

"We must substitute another word for 'liked,' Margrit," said Mr. Gambol. "We are talking about love, my dear girl."

Love! She remembered Felix Christie. It was less than an hour since they parted.

A vivid flush dyed her face, even her forehead and throat turning scarlet. She freed herself from Mr. Gambol with sudden vigour, and sank down into a chair, her elbows on the table, her hands clasped over her burning cheeks.

Mr. Gambol was flattered by this evidence, as he thought, of overwhelming gratitude and happiness. He stroked her hair. Clever girl! He himself could not have arranged those soft waves and curls more cunningly. What an acquisition she would be in the business, not to attend to ladies unless she chose, but to show off the different styles.

"There! There! She mustn't be overcome. She must meet good fortune like a brave little woman," he murmured.

Finding that even this tender speech failed to subdue the emotion of the young lady, Mr. Gambol took possession of her hand again and kissed it. She pushed him off.

"You must give me time!" she said, hoarsely. "I don't know what to say. I *am* so miserable! Hush! Get away—your sister——"

Her quick ear had caught the sound of an approaching footstep. She clutched at the newspaper and began to read. Mr. Gambol, who was not quite so adroit in such matters, took up a pen and wrote unintelligible words on the envelopes of his letters.

Miss Gambol, cheerful, cherry-cheeked, and unsuspicious, entered the room with a budget of news from the friend whom she had been visiting. Pearl forced herself to join in the conversation, but Mr. Gambol feigned to be absorbed in his correspondence. He was very complacent, for the possibility of a rejection never entered his head. His sister's absolute unconsciousness of the situation amused him so much that he forgave her for interrupting his love scene.

Pearl, at the first opportunity, slipped away. Mr. Gambol, with more alacrity than she gave him credit for, managed to overtake her on the second floor.

"Speak to me after supper; I'll be in the shop," he whispered, squeezing her hand.

She gave no answer, but ran up to her own room.

"How strange it is!" said Pearl to herself, at once going to the looking-glass. "How funny it all is!"

She had partly recovered from her agitation, and was able to think calmly about the afternoon.

Already she was accustomed to the idea of Mr. Gambol as a rival of Felix Christie.

Gambol knew of her engagement, but the fact that he had simply ignored it had had a curious effect upon Pearl, not awakening any indignation on account of her absent lover, but making her see the whole affair through the hairdresser's eyes.

The very reticence and romance of Christie's nature made his love seem unreal—fantastic—too wild to be taken seriously—when he was away from her. It had always been so. She thought of him like a stranger, in spite of her intimate knowledge of all his life; she was never wholly at her ease with him, unless their talk happened to be solely and simply of love.

She meant to be true, but the temptation to listen to Mr. Gambol, and her pride in his capture, blunted her sense of loyalty.

There could be no harm, she told herself, in listening to what he had to say. Christie need never know. If he had been annoyed at Millidew's thoughtless conduct, what would he say to Pearl deliberately encouraging Albert Gambol? She was positively frightened at the thought of his anger.

Was ever a girl so beset and worried? There was a strain of mental laziness and love of ease in Pearl that made her bitterly resent her present dilemma. Why were men so absurdly jealous and unreasonable?

It was in this mood, injured and irritable, that she went down to supper.

Miss Gambol, who was always good-tempered, tried to interest her with the usual gossip, and Mr. Gambol saw to it that she had the best cut from the cold joint and the biggest strawberries in the dish. Young Tom and the twins, who did not choose to conciliate their guest, made her inwardly furious by their squabbles and chatter.

Directly the meal was over she threw herself into an

arm-chair, and did not offer to help Miss Gambol clear away the plates and dishes.

She read the newspaper, column after column, with but a hazy idea of its meaning. All her mind was occupied with the events of the day.

Both Christie and Mr. Gambol had made her realize, each in his different way, that the time was past for prevarication. She had reached one of the cross-roads of life and her choice must be made.

When she bade Mr. Gambol good night, his sister being in the room, he could only press her hand, lifting his eyelids with an expressive smile.

Pearl went slowly upstairs, parting with Miss Gambol affectionately at her own door. She did not enter the room where the twins were already asleep, but stood still, listening, until she heard the key turned in Miss Gambol's lock.

Then, even more slowly than she had ascended the stairs, on the tips of her toes, she crept down to the shop.

She paused at the door, again listening ; there was the sound of a heavy step pacing up and down. Gaslight gleamed through the crack. A couple of minutes the girl stood, pondering, irresolute, her ear against the panel.

There was no sign of impatience from the man within. His certainty that she would come was not unattractive to Pearl. She had no liking for a nervous lover.

When she opened the door Mr. Gambol stopped in his walk, but did not advance to meet her.

" Come along, little lady ! Come along ! " he said in a voice of patronizing welcome.

He fetched one of the red velvet chairs from the ladies' hairdressing saloon, and she sat down. Mr. Gambol went behind the counter, where he always felt most at his ease.

Pearl assumed an air of supreme indifference, glancing round the familiar shop as if it interested her far more than anything he could possibly have to say.

" Who do you think I was writing to this afternoon ? "

was the apparently irrelevant question with which he opened the conversation.

"How on earth should I know?" exclaimed Pearl, turning her head sharply to look at him.

"To the principal of a high-class educational establishment," he answered. "I have determined to send the twins to boarding-school. Do you approve, Margrit?"

"I think it's a very good plan," said Pearl. "Their aunt is spoiling them shockingly."

"My second communication was to a relative in the north of England, to whom I intend to confide the business training of Tom," continued Mr. Gambol, carefully choosing his words.

Pearl laughed.

"You're getting rid of all your household. What do you intend to do with your sister—and me, Mr. Gambol?"

"Say Albert!" he pleaded, leaning over the counter.

Pearl laughed again.

"Why should I say Albert all of a sudden?"

"Because it is my name," was Mr. Gambol's very good reason.

"Oh, very well!" said Pearl, with a little impatient gesture. "What are you going to do with your sister—Albert?"

"We need not discuss the disposal of Alice at this stage of the proceedings," he replied, in a tone that implied that it would be easy to sell Alice or give her away later on. "Let us talk about ourselves, Pearl."

She looked distressed for a minute. Felix Christie had used almost the same words in the afternoon. Then she shrugged her shoulders, with a return to indifference.

"I don't see what there is to talk about, Mr. Gambol—oh, very well, Albert!—except that you hinted there was something you wished to tell me."

"Exactly! Allow me to bring another chair. May I take your hand?"

"If you like."

So he took possession of the hand, holding it under one of his own on the velvet arm of the chair.

"As I mentioned before supper, dear, a man cannot attain affluence in my business, however much he devotes himself to it. I realized this fact years ago, but I was very slow to take advantage of any of the tempting opportunities offered to the public in different ways to supplement their incomes. Do you understand?"

"Of course I do."

"Very well then. I put a little money, a very little, into a safe concern about six years ago. It paid fairly well, so I ventured a little farther, only touching what are called 'industrials' in the way of shares. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly."

"One thing leads to another, and I have been very fortunate during the past six months. There is no necessity to go into details—women can't understand them—but I am in a position to retire from business, if I choose, with a very tidy little income for life."

"Speculations are always risky," said Pearl.

"Quite right, dear; but I have made myself safe, being naturally a rather cautious man. Forethought, prudence, taking advantage of other people's weaknesses or ignorance—those are the virtues I have always endeavoured to cultivate. But what has all this got to do with Miss Margrit, eh?"

Relapsing into a playful mood, Mr. Gambol seized upon her other hand, making her look at him.

"I don't know," said Pearl.

"It means that I can give her whatever she wants!" he continued in an amiable, singsong voice. "It means that I can gratify all her little wishes. She can do whatever she likes. I don't intend to go out of business, but she needn't spend a minute of her time in the shop unless she chooses.

"She shall never want for pretty gowns, or little bits of

jewellery. She can jaunt off to the country or the seaside whenever she feels inclined. She can give her little parties, and keep a couple of servants to wait upon her ! "

Pearl was surprised at Mr. Gambol's eloquence. When he stopped speaking she did not answer, but continued looking at him, very steadily, with her big blue eyes.

" What do you say, Margrit ? " he went on in a practical tone after his flight. " Will you marry me ? Yes or no ? "

" You forget—I am engaged to Felix Christie," said Pearl in a low voice.

He instantly released her hands and laughed, dismissing Felix Christie with a wave of his flapper of a hand.

" Boy-and-girl affair, my dear ! It would never have come to anything."

" On the contrary, he wants to marry me at once," said Pearl, with a momentary flash of indignation.

" Really ? Really ? " questioned Mr. Gambol, leaning back in his chair. " Where are you going to live ? In a garret in Drury Lane, I suppose ? How are you going to live ? I shouldn't have thought Mr. Christie could afford to keep a wife very comfortably, judging by his own appearance."

Pearl left her chair and paced up and down the shop, not in Mr. Gambol's quiet manner, but with a hurrying, wild step.

She pushed her hair back from her face, regardless of its curls and waves, as if she were suddenly hot and breathless.

He watched her closely, still leaning back in his chair, smiling a little, with half-closed eyelids.

She was apparently unconscious of his gaze, racked with her own thoughts, for her drawn face expressed an agony of indecision.

Curiosity and interest, almost impersonal in its intensity, took possession of Mr. Gambol. He felt as if he were looking at a fine actress on the stage, wondering how the scene would end, and admiring her unrestrained display of emotion.

Now and again she paused in her hurried pacing of the floor, brooding a minute with her hand clenched against her mouth. She did not give one glance to the man. She was utterly absorbed in herself.

Suddenly Mr. Gambol rose to his feet and caught her in his arms as she passed him by.

Pearl struggled, but her strength was nothing compared with his. Only a few words passed between them—quick, passionate, incoherent on his part ; protesting, appealing, but not ill-pleased on hers—before he kissed her several times and let her go.

She instantly ran out of the shop, but remembered, even in her agitation and haste, to close the door softly behind her.

Mr. Gambol, after staring blankly round about him as if he hardly realized that she had gone, sat down again in his velvet chair to soothe his nerves with a cigar.

His face, at first a little doubtful and bewildered, gradually assumed its usual expression of bland self-satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE END OF YOUTH

CHRISTIE did not return immediately to Drury Lane after his parting with Pearl Henning. He wanted to avoid a meeting with Millidew until he had decided, definitely, how to deal with Pearl's accusations.

He was very angry with Millidew, but it was not the kind of anger that could be appeased by violence. Millidew's character in the past, as his conduct in the present, had often wounded his friend.

The artist was so incapable of fulfilling his own promises —in work, affection, or the ordinary affairs of life—but he could be so good a companion, so amusing and responsive, that Christie had never quite lost the delight and pleasure that his company had first afforded him.

Even in his weaknesses and dissipations Christie had been sensible of the Millidew touch as he recognized it in his worst drawings; the touch of a peculiar humour and lovableness that has endeared many worse men to stricter judges.

It was the knowledge of these qualities in his friend that added to Christie's perplexities. He could not hope to make Ned see the fine point that his treatment of Pearl, by its very flippancy, was a greater injury than if he had been seriously involved.

Pearl's own attitude towards the matter—"Why make a fuss? He was only flirting!"—indicated Millidew's probable line of defence.

If the offended lover had only been anxious for a quarrel, the artist would have satisfied him on that point, for he quarrelled more or less with everybody he knew; but

Christie longed for reparation and the healing of the wound, not for revenge or severance of their old tie.

The fire of jealousy that Pearl's words had lit in his heart had quickly burnt itself out, his belief in her love was so great. In a few weeks they would be married. Try as he might, Christie could not follow the advice Houghton Buckley had once given him to "look beyond the honeymoon."

With an effort he banished Millidew from his mind, concentrating all his thoughts on his future plans.

Pearl's suggestion of a basement flat positively amused him in recollection; it was so utterly unsuited to her bright beauty and his own love of air and sunshine.

Her remarks on wholesale furnishing struck him as deliciously childish. She looked on a big shop in the light of a fairy godmother, able to gratify all one's heart's desires. A second thought, that perhaps the contents of a big shop *would* gratify all her heart's desires, was not so complimentary to Pearl. He put it on one side.

Then he remembered her candid avowal that his friends' conversation bored her frightfully. That was unfortunate. He must add other friends to his list to counteract the boring effect on the future Mrs. Christie.

Mr. and Miss Gambol occurred to his mind. But could he tolerate Mr. Gambol? Of course he could! Pearl liked him. That was enough. He wondered how the Chippetts would appeal to his bride. Yes, he felt they would be satisfactory on the whole. He was not at all sure about Lady Buckley. Pearl would say she was "stuck up." Sir Charles was out of the question. They would have nothing to say to each other.

Thus his mind wandered from point to point, slightly dazed in the mists that enveloped the sun of his day. He walked in Hyde Park, refreshed by the cool roof of leaves as he loitered under the trees, with the soft spring of the grass beneath his feet.

Even at this time, when his thoughts were passionately

personal, all revolving about his marriage, Christie could not banish the alluring, nebulous forms of his imagination, the characters of his next unwritten book. They approached or fled from him as persistently as a half-forgotten melody haunts the ear of a musician.

In the evening he went to dinner with one of the men at Buckley's, who lived alone. This man was the author of many unacted plays, and had had one sketch accepted by a music-hall artist.

Christie found him in a state of nervous excitement, for the sketch was to be produced in a small hall in one of the suburbs that very night.

"You must go with me, Chris!" said the anxious author. "You're just the sort of brave man to help me to face it."

He spoke as if he were going to be tortured. Christie promised not to desert him until the worst was over, glad of the opportunity to stop away from Drury Lane. He had determined not to speak to Millidew until the following day.

The performance at the music-hall, with the exception of his friend's sketch, wearied him to silence. He turned his eyes from the stage, nodding replies to his companion's occasional remarks.

It was past midnight when he turned into Drury Lane. On such a night a lover was tempted to wander far, for the full summer moon was hanging in a starry sky, and he approached his four walls reluctantly.

He stopped in front of the lopsided little house, his hand in his pocket searching for the key, staring at the open shop-window. It meant that Millidew had not yet returned home, for it was their invariable custom for the first man in to put up the shutters.

"No matter! I'll go to bed at once to avoid him," thought Christie.

Even if he had been absolutely certain of keeping his own temper in that first interview with his friend, he knew

that Millidew was rarely sober enough so late at night to listen to reason. They would be sure to quarrel.

He thrust the key into the lock, after glancing up and down the street to satisfy himself that the artist was not approaching, and hurried into the house.

The little room was in darkness, and he heard, in the distant yard, the dismal howling of his dog.

"Hullo there!" he shouted, to cheer Neb with a word of greeting. "Too bad to chain you up! Wait a minute, old boy, till I get a light."

He struck a match and found the gas, but as he turned towards the yard, to release his dog, the look of the room made him stop, staring round, as if he had entered the wrong house.

The floor was bare of rugs. The old chapel pew; Millidew's work-table; the quaint, worn leather chairs that the two friends had bought at an auction sale at Willis's Rooms, St. James's; the Japanese scrolls; and the inlaid cabinet with glass doors—Mr. Ferguson's contribution to their furnishing—were all gone!

Christie went into the yard and mechanically unchained Neb; then he returned to the sitting-room and began to put up the shutters of the shop-window, the blank look of surprise in his face deepening into an expression of silent, brooding dismay.

The shop-window, when he looked at it closer, added to his bewilderment, for all Millidew's printed cartoons and original drawings had been removed.

A hasty examination of the drawers in his own writing-table confirmed him in the idea that no ordinary burglar had entered the house in his absence.

Then he ran upstairs to Millidew's room. It was stripped of furniture; a quantity of discarded clothes was strewn over the bed, and the floor was littered with bits of newspaper, string, torn letters, old bills, sketch-books, and magazines. Everything pointed to the hurried packing and departure of the occupant.

There were a few cigarettes and an empty bottle and glass—Edward Millidew's farewell gifts to his friend—on the window-sill.

Christie went downstairs again, whistling softly to himself. He seemed bewildered. The place looked so desolate and poverty-stricken.

He sat down in the only chair left in the sitting-room, his eyes wandering over the discoloured walls. Trifling incidents of the past few weeks, hardly noticed at the time, returned to his mind—Millidew's frequent absences from home, the sale of his pictures to Old Sols, his impatience and ill-temper at being questioned, his occasional bursts of unaccountable hilarity. All these things became clear to Christie in the light of the artist's departure.

He guessed that his own lack of suspicion had amused Millidew, but he was not at all angry with his friend on that account. His great difficulty was to fully realize the situation. Had he really gone? Gone, without a word of farewell! Gone, like a thief, with the property that belonged to them both.

The unspeakable meanness of it was so repugnant to Christie's feelings that he actually went to the door, opened it, and looked up and down the street again, as if he expected his friend's return.

Then he searched in vain for a letter. Finally he took out their mutual agreement with the landlord of the lopsided little house, forgetting that it had been made out in his name only by Millidew's desire. He remembered consenting without any hesitation.

The scene in the agent's office flashed into his mind as clearly as a scene he had once witnessed on the stage. Millidew, in his careless way, had represented Christie as the responsible man: "You're working at Buckley's, Chris. You're a steady, reliable chap. Leave me out of the legal documents—it's all the same—we really go shares in everything."

Now he read the agreement carefully, and Ned's desertion became more despicable, leaving him legally responsible, not only for rent until they had arranged to give up the house, but for repairs on leaving, gas bills, water rates, and taxes.

The date of his marriage became indefinite as he brooded over these responsibilities, but it was forgotten in a sudden thought that struck him down, like a blow between the eyes.

Edward Millidew had robbed him of Pearl! Her revelation of his friend's disloyalty had gone out of his mind in the shock of discovering his flight, but now it returned, exaggerated out of all recognition.

Pearl had tried to tell him the truth, but he had frightened her in his anger. She was not to blame. It was Millidew who had betrayed him!

Christie sprang to his feet, hardly knowing what he did, and rushed out of the house, leaving the gas flaring in the room behind him. The dog slipped out at his side, unheeded, and followed closely at his heels, like a black shadow in the moonlight.

He swiftly threaded his way through mean streets, regardless of the sights and sounds of the night in London—so appalling, so sad, so horrible—until he struck into Oxford Street, a little distance from Marble Arch.

The quietude of the main road, and the soft wind blowing against his face, gradually restored his composure and good sense. He saw that his impulse to rush to Pearl was both absurd and impossible at that hour. It was the act of a madman. It meant that he placed her love on the low level of Millidew's friendship.

He recalled her words, the touch of her dear cheek, the shadow of her hair falling over him as she said good-bye, and was overwhelmed with shame at his own doubts. But he could not go back to Drury Lane. He was still too agitated to control his wild and foolish desire to go to Pearl at once, to protect her from Millidew's influence; to

prove to himself that perhaps his old Ned, after all, was not the traitor that he dreaded to find him.

Walking more slowly, he still went on in the direction of Bayswater.

There was a change in the sky : a pink flush, silvery and faint, grew out of the pale east. The air was very still. He heard the sleepy chirrup of a sparrow.

By the time he reached Mr. Gambol's house, with its closed doors and drawn blinds, the sun had risen ; but the clouds of the summer night floated across the heavens, like the veils of the setting moon.

Christie felt weary and depressed, but his sense of the ridiculous alone saved him from walking up and down the road until such hour as he could hope to see Pearl.

So he strolled still farther on, until he reached Marylebone Road, where he and Neb made an early breakfast at a coffee-stall. He had not enjoyed a meal so much since the days of his extreme poverty.

After a long talk with the keeper of the stall, who was a slow, argumentative man of strong political opinions opposed to Christie's, the young man—remembering the days when such a luxury was far beyond his means—indulged in a wash and brush-up, and then turned his steps once more in the direction of Mr. Gambol's house, accompanied by the refreshed and patient Neb.

He arrived at the minute when a lad was taking down the shutters of the hairdresser's shop and the general servant taking in the morning milk.

It was impossible to call at such an hour, so he bought a paper from an early newsboy, leaned against the sunny wall in a side street, and read it from the title on the first page to the publisher's name on the last.

It was Buckley's morning paper. Christie wondered what Sir Charles would think of his midsummer madness. He would never dare to confess it to the practical Houghton.

At about half-past eight Christie once more found his

way to the hairdresser's. He went into the shop. The door leading into the house was open, and there was a strong smell of coffee and fried bacon.

The young barber named Partridge was polishing the looking-glasses. He expressed surprise by a shrill whistle on recognizing the visitor.

" Morning, Mr. Christie ! Walk in, sir ! " he said, with an hospitable wave of the hand from the gents' shaving saloon to the door leading into the house, so that he could take his choice between the two.

" Good morning, Partridge. I won't go in, thanks. I am anxious to speak to Miss Henning on particular business. Can you ask her to spare me a few minutes ? " answered Christie, who had no desire to interrupt the Gambol breakfast.

" Certainly, Mr. Christie. Be seated, I beg. Very salubrious morning ! " replied the young barber, who was forming his speech and manner on Mr. Gambol.

Partridge was absent for several minutes. Christie heard him parleying with the general servant. He returned in a dejected mood.

" Sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Christie, but Miss Henning says she can't see anybody just now. Oh yes, she's up "—anticipating the visitor's question—" and having her breakfast with the guv'nor and Miss G."

" Will you ask her to make an appointment for later in the day, Partridge ? "

" I'll do my best," said the young barber, again retiring.

He returned, dolefully shaking his head.

" Miss Henning says she's going out for the whole day, but she'll write a note to your place this morning, so you'll get it by the afternoon post."

Surprised at this message, for Pearl had never before refused to see him, Christie could only scribble a few words on a leaf from his note-book to be delivered by Partridge. Then he turned to leave the shop, but stopped, half ashamed of the question that rose to his lips.

"Do you know if—if Mr. Millidew called here yesterday? Do you know him?"

"Oh, I know Mr. Millidew!" exclaimed Partridge, with a grin. "Isn't he a thin gentleman with his hair cut something shocking, if you'll excuse me saying so?"

"Yes."

"He didn't call here yesterday as far as I know. He hasn't been here for some time," said Partridge.

Christie, more than a little surprised at himself when he thought of his tramp through the streets at dawn, returned to Drury Lane.

The feeling came over him, as he sat in a taxi homeward bound, with Neb at his feet, that the whole affair was a hateful dream. He could not believe, in the temperate light of day, that Edward Millidew had left him alone or Pearl Henning given a hint of disloyalty.

When he opened the door of his little house, however, there were evidences of his sorry plight in the empty room; the gas, as he had left it, flaring; the bare walls; the landlord's agreement spread out upon the table.

Bolting the door—for he had no desire for chance visitors—Christie went upstairs to his own room, threw himself upon the bed, and, almost immediately, sank into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Neb had followed him. After Christie closed his eyes the dog put his paws on the coverlet and reared up to look at his master's face. He listened to his quiet breathing for a minute, then, finding that all was well, stretched himself on the floor beside the bed and slept too.

When Christie awoke he saw, by the shadow on the wall, that it was past midday. His first thought was of Pearl's promised letter. He could reasonably expect it to arrive within the next few hours.

Feeling strong and energetic after his long repose, it was easy to occupy his time and hands, but the afternoon passed into evening, and there was no letter.

The doubt and misery which had mastered him on the

previous day threatened to return in the sharpness of his disappointment.

He was not to be conquered a second time, for there was work to be done in the revision of an article he had promised to one of the Buckley editors. Then he played the violin, with Neb for audience, successfully persuading himself that he had quite recovered from the shock and vexation of Millidew's flitting.

The next morning's post brought him no letter. He had passed a restless night, trying to make the difference in his financial position square with the expenses of his approaching marriage. He had no hope of tracking Millidew, who had long talked enthusiastically of going abroad, where a man could live cheaply and avoid his creditors.

The afternoon of the second day of his anxiety found Christie once more in Bayswater.

Miss Henning was not at home. She had left no message. The servant did not know where she had gone or when she would return.

He asked for Miss Gambol.

Miss Gambol was voluble, but vague.

"Dear Pearl hasn't been quite herself for the last day or two," she said.

"Do you think she is ill?" asked the anxious lover.

"Not at all, judging by her appetite and appearance," Miss Gambol hastened to assure him; "but she gets so very irritable and takes you up so very short. I'm not complaining of her, Mr. Christie, for nobody could be more affectionate than she has been to me. My brother has remarked on it, and he is extremely observant. He takes a great interest in Pearl for my sake."

"When do you think I can see her?" asked Christie, ignoring Miss Gambol's observations.

"I don't think I should call till to-morrow evening, if I were you," she answered. "Pearl's going to be out all day again. She said so at breakfast this morning."

"Where does she go?" he pondered, more to himself than to his companion.

"I can no more tell you than the man in the moon!" declared Miss Gambol. "She put on her best dress before breakfast, and directly we had finished out she went. My brother said she had gone shopping, but what should she have to buy?"

"Are you sure there was no message for me?"

"Not a syllable; but I expect she will drop you a line when she comes home."

With this cold comfort Christie was obliged to depart.

He had a strong—he told himself an unwarrantable—conviction that Pearl did not intend to write; but the idea of Millidew having supplanted him in her affection had passed out of his mind.

Half in curiosity, half with the object of passing time, he went in search of Ned's friend and patron, Old Sols.

Mr. Solomon's place of business was hidden, like the outline in a picture puzzle, in the network of small streets that lies between Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road.

Christie had some difficulty in finding it. The first thing he saw, in the centre of the window, was the old chapel pew, looking, as it had always done in Drury Lane, much too big for its surroundings.

He was not long in discovering the whereabouts of the remainder of the property of which he had considered himself part owner.

Entering the shop, that smelt musty and was almost dark, he found old Sols sitting on a high stool under the single gas-jet, reading the "Jewish Chronicle." Old Sols might have been a portrait by Rembrandt of a Jewish merchant, with his heavy, dark features, his benign and melancholy expression, the eyes alone, deep-set and liquid, showing the keen and speculative mind. He spoke little, but to the purpose.

Mr. Millidew had asked him to appraise the goods several

weeks ago. He had had no idea that Mr. Christie could claim any share in them. The money had been paid. The matter was at an end as far as he was concerned.

Christie expressed his opinion of Millidew's conduct in emphatic words.

"Ah!" said Old Sols, having politely heard him to a finish, and returned to his newspaper.

The young man, who had never seen such an impenetrable face, forgot his injuries in his interest in the Jew. He peered into the gloomy corners of the shop, filled with treasures of other days. Old Sols, who had apparently been absorbed in reading, instantly recognized a probable customer. There was nothing of the bargaining trader in his outward manner; he was more like a rich and eccentric connoisseur allowing a stranger a peep at his collection; but the fact remained that when Christie left the shop he had promised to repurchase his own inlaid cabinet at a very fair profit to Old Sols.

Another restless night was succeeded by another anxious day.

Pearl refused to see him. He wrote her a long, serious letter. It was such a letter as a woman rarely receives; a love-letter that the numberless readers of Felix Christie's books would give much to see; a manly letter, but eloquent with the freshness and faith of his boyhood.

He did not approach her again, but waited for her answer, believing that she would send for him—holding her image exalted in his heart.

Christie was sitting alone, on the sixth day after Millidew's departure, trying to read. His dog lay at his feet.

The room was unchanged, desolate, and dismantled. Heavy rain lashed against the window, for the summer heat had ended in a summer storm. There was no sound but the hurrying feet of the passers-by, with now and then a shrill cab-whistle in the distance, or the rumble and splash of wheels in the road.

He looked up from the weary page at a low growl from

the dog. A second later there was a feeble double knock at the door. He sprang to his feet, for the thought flashed into his mind that it might be Pearl.

He threw open the door, and looked at the woman who was standing out in the rain vaguely for a second before he recognized her.

"Why, it's Miss Gambol!" then he exclaimed, taking her dripping umbrella and inviting her to enter the house.

She looked a deplorable figure, with her wet skirts clinging about her ankles, and the gay feathers and flowers in her bonnet draggled and limp.

"What a bad night for you to be abroad!" he said kindly. "Take off your wet cloak, Miss Gambol, and let me get you a pair of dry slippers. Is there anything the matter with Pearl? Is she well?"

"Oh yes, she's very well. This is very good of you, Mr. Christie," she answered.

Her hands were shaking so much that she could not unfasten her beaded mantle, so the young man did it for her, then placed her in a chair, and, kneeling down, took off her wet boots.

When he looked up, smiling, he noticed for the first time that the little woman, usually so beaming and cherry-cheeked, was pale and haggard; while her black, bird-like eyes were dull and red-rimmed with crying.

"My dear Miss Gambol!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter?"

"It's my brother, Mr. Christie! Oh, it's my brother Albert!" she answered, beginning to sob and gasp.

"Mr. Gambol?" asked Christie. "What has happened to him? Is he ill? Has he met with an accident? I hope he isn't—dead?"

"No, no, it's not quite so bad as that!" she cried. "You'll never guess the truth. Oh, Mr. Christie, he's married!"

If Miss Gambol expected Christie to express horror and incredulity, she was disappointed. He certainly looked

surprised, and then sympathetic, but that was all. He had no suspicion of the truth.

"Married by licence at a registry office this morning!" she went on. "They had lunch at one of those big restaurants, just my brother and the bride and a couple of his friends. They came home together in a cab, as bold as brass, and told me."

"My dear Miss Gambol, you must make the best of it. Why did they keep it a secret from you? That hardly seems kind or fair," said Christie.

She looked at him in silence for a minute, helplessly. Then she stealthily took hold of his hand.

"Mr. Christie—don't you suspect—haven't you any idea——?" she said in a strained voice, and left the sentence unfinished.

He withdrew his hand and took a step back, looking at her with indefinable dread.

"Oh, Mr. Christie," said Miss Gambol again, "my brother is married to Pearl!"

He did not move. Not a word passed his lips. His face became absolutely blank of expression, as if he had been shot through the heart and his spirit had leapt out of his body.

The woman gave a little scream of fear, but as she rose to her feet with an impulse to rush away Christie closed his eyes for a second, and she saw his skin darken to dull red—in pain, in anger, in shame—she could not read his thoughts. Then he looked at her steadily, as if he were trying to realize her words.

"Pearl!" he said hoarsely; and then again, "Pearl!"

"I never dreamed of such a thing," she said, finding relief in many words. "My brother always pretended to be fond of her just for my sake. They must have done all their courting on the sly. Oh, they planned it very nicely! The twins are to be sent to school, and Tom packed off to the country. As for me"—here the poor little woman began to cry again—"I'm to clear out of the house as

soon as possible. Albert says he will make adequate provision for my old age. Those were his very words. My old age, indeed! I've worked for my brother and taken care of his children for eleven years, and now this chit of a girl is mistress of his house!"

Christie did not seem to hear her. He began to pace up and down the room.

"Pearl!" he muttered. "Pearl is married!"

"I asked them why they were both so underhand," said Miss Gambol. "My brother said it was best for all parties, and of course she brazened it out. They've gone away for their honeymoon, and I'm left behind to pack my traps and march! Partridge is looking after the business——"

Christie stopped abruptly in front of her, interrupting the flow of her tears.

"It can't be true!" he exclaimed, harshly. "You must be lying to me. She would never marry your brother. Your brother! It's horrible—damnable—an outrage——"

"It is the truth! I was bound to tell you," said Miss Gambol. "It's done, and it can't be undone. I'd better go. You want to be alone, Mr. Christie. I can see that."

Christie opened the front door and leaned against the doorpost, letting the rain beat upon his face, as if he were parched with thirst.

He shook Miss Gambol's hand at parting with a word of sympathy for her sorrow. When she looked round, at the end of Drury Lane, he was still standing in the same position. She paused for a minute and waved her hand. He did not see her, or respond.

When Christie at last re-entered the house he barred and locked the door. His instinct was to hide.

But there was no weakness in his feeling of irreparable loss. He was ashamed of the smarting tears that filled his eyes, and rubbed them away with a rough hand. From the first minute he had struggled for self-control.

Any man who has loved and lost a woman in the days

of his manhood's youth and remembers her, however dimly, will understand Felix Christie in the hour of his ordeal.

That Pearl Henning was false and callous, that he had known they were ill-matched, had no effect upon his passionate regret and longing.

It had been given to him—inestimable gift !—to see all that was cherishable and latent in her character, as his eyes had seen all that was brightest and best in her beauty. He had called her his angel, and awakened her, for a little while, to the perception of love at its highest.

He had made her his in spirit. No man could rob him of the past ! But the exultation of this thought, as it passed away, swept him to the opposite extreme of personal bitterness.

She was married to Gambol ! It was the night of their wedding day——

Christie could not rest. He had gone up to his room and thrown himself, without undressing, on his bed, but he rose in the stillness of the midnight hour and returned to the sitting-room, where there was space to walk up and down in the darkness.

Once he thought of Edward Millidew, and fully appreciated, for the first time, the pleasure and happiness that friendship had given him. He was a man made for friends, but Millidew—the first, the most trusted of them all—was not beside him in his need. Millidew had deserted him.

His glowing remembrance of Pearl in all her moods, combined with his power of concentration, enabled him to summon her image at will, and in so vivid a way that he seemed to see her and hear her in the empty room.

He opened his arms to feel her within his grasp ; he turned his face for the soft caress of her fair cheek ; he whispered the meaningless, fond names she loved.

The fantasy passed. He tried to evoke, by the same effort, the dear companions that never before had failed him—the creations of his brain, the children of his books—

but they had fled from him in his anger and dismay. He could not call them back.

The rain still lashed against the windows.

He sat down in the chair by the writing-table and buried his face in his hands. Then he gradually became conscious of weariness of body, but with no desire to sleep.

The dog had listened to his steps all night, followed him to his bedroom, and returned noiselessly behind him. Now he crept forward, straining up to see the hidden face, and tried to lick the hands of his master.

"I'd forgotten you, old friend," said Christie, without moving.

At the sound of his voice the dog made a little, strange sound and laid his head upon Christie's knee.

The man put down a hand to touch him.

They were still in the same place when the dawn broke.

Then Christie rose and unlocked the door. The storm had passed, and the sky was splashed with angry red clouds.

Around him stretched the mean streets his fancy had turned into chapters of adventure and romance. He realized the sadness and the solitude of life.

He knew, in the sombre, quiet light of a new day, that his youth was over.

Behind him were the radiant days of the Past. Before him, the shrouded years of the Future.

CHAPTER XXIX

A RETROSPECT

THERE are few prettier things, in its own way, than a bright, airy room filled with a gay, well-dressed party.

There must not be a crowd, for then the frocks are crushed and the atmosphere becomes oppressive. Music is permissible, but it should avoid a too serious note.

The talk must ripple, with enough laughter to save it from monotony. No subject is tabooed, but every one must be handled gracefully. Exaggerated flippancy is as unforgivable as mock heroics.

The men meet the ladies in the modern spirit of consideration and equality. Wit and humour are the weapons of the social duellists up-to-date, keen thrusts being given and taken with equable temper.

The topic of the hour is the talk of the minute, and although its depths can be easily plumbed, at all events the surface sparkles. If there is a touch of insincerity—not to use the word humbug—it is of the kind that embellishes life.

Such a party was in full swing at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Houghton Buckley. The day was in mid-June ; four o'clock the hour.

Popular and well beloved, it would have been hard to find a more charming, self-possessed, and high-spirited young woman than Mrs. Houghton Buckley. She was admirably suited to her husband, as they had both foreseen she would be.

After two years of married life they were even better pleased with each other than at first, and equally devoted to their little son. In short, as Sir Charles Buckley once observed, the strength and durability of the Pargetter-Smith boilers combined with the enterprise of the Buckley Press had made for matrimonial triumph.

Houghton had gained a little weight in two years. He was ready, like a well-trained actor, to play every part in life on well-defined lines. This was the period of the "young husband and father" scene of society drama, when a man gradually forgets his boyhood in preparation for the pleasant thirties, to be followed by the genial appearance in the cast of a man of forty. Every year he became more prominent in the great firm of Buckley's.

Sir Charles, seeing his own ambition and money sense more and more apparent in his elder son, relied upon Joe for the finer sympathy and companionship that were independent of these qualities.

Joe, always self-indulgent and slow of intellectual development, fulfilled his hopes in affection, but failed to satisfy his critical faculty.

He was proud of them both as of old, but knew himself to be, in spite of his numberless friends and varied interests, a lonely man at heart, misunderstood by the world he courted, secretly indifferent to the position and wealth he had worked so hard to attain.

Two years had made little difference in Lady Buckley, who highly approved of her son's marriage, his house, his wife, and his baby. She had always declared that Rosalind Pargetter would be worthy of the traditions of the Houghton family, that produced exemplary wives and good hostesses as certainly as it produced temperate, worldly-wise husbands and clever men of business.

Rosalind constantly deferred to her mother-in-law's judgment and taste, and never failed to amuse, and

judiciously flatter, Sir Charles. It was exactly the right treatment for them both.

Her pretty room, to return to the opening of the chapter, was fragrant with roses from the Buckley gardens in Herefordshire. She looked like a rose herself, flecked with a few diamond dewdrops.

She was the centre of a small group of people, discussing a certain book that passed from hand to hand, until it fell into the eager fingers of Mr. Ferguson, who, with characteristic coolness, carried it off to a comfortable chair, sat down, and began to read. Everybody laughed.

" Alick really pays the book and its author the greatest compliment of us all," said Sir Charles Buckley. " We are content to criticize and praise. He has started to read it over again."

" For the third time, Sir Charles," said Miss Ferguson.

" I haven't read it all through as yet," said Houghton ; " I have so little time ! Too bad of me, for Christie sent us an advance copy weeks ago. Doesn't the title, ' Edelweiss,' strike one as a little too ordinary, not to say commonplace, for a book about Switzerland ? "

" From any other writer—yes ! But not from a man like Felix Christie," answered one of the ladies. " Everything he touches becomes extraordinary."

" There are only two kinds of titles for books, after all," said Sir Charles ; " the striking or the obvious—a flight of fancy or a statement of fact. If a writer can't hit upon the former, he had better content himself with the latter at once, for anything in between is sure to be puzzling and ineffective."

" I never saw the point of Mr. Christie calling his first novel ' Onyx,' " observed Lady Buckley.

" Now, I thought it was particularly happy, considering the style of the story," said Sir Charles. " You see, the word is Greek and means an agate formed of the dark and light streaks of the mysterious chalcedony. The onyx itself is dull, perhaps—some people would say like Christie's

heroine—only semi-pellucid, but it at once suggests the sardonyx, and there we are at the silicious gem of the substance that enters into the composition of nearly all minerals, and, roughly speaking, is the strength of the hills, the foundation of all wild and inspiring beauty."

"What has all that got to do with Christie's quaint book about London life?" asked Joe Buckley wearily. "I don't believe the word 'onyx' was mentioned once, except on the title page."

"There must have been a subtle reason for that," said Mrs. Buckley.

"I doubt it!" said her husband, with a laugh. "There's nothing subtle about Chris. Do you know the explanation he once gave of the fine simplicity of that first book of his, 'London Dawns'? We were discussing style in literature one night, at that little house where he used to live in Drury Lane, and one of the men asked him why he invariably used short words in his 'Dawns.' He looked thoughtful for a moment, and we waited anxiously for the answer, expecting a revelation, a final word, as it were, on the subject. 'I wrote with such simplicity,' said Chris, 'because I couldn't spell long words.'"

"Why didn't he buy a dictionary?" asked the practical Lady Buckley.

"Because he could not afford the one he wanted," replied Houghton. "He had set his heart upon a certain Johnson in three volumes. I remember all about it, because I went with him to carry it home from the book-shop in Long Acre on the day he bought it."

"I recollect that Christie had quite a good little collection of books at Drury Lane," said one of the men. "What did he do with it when he went abroad?"

"All sold," said Houghton. "He seemed to be very heavily in debt. I believe that Edward Millidew had left him in the lurch, slipped off without paying the rent, or something of that kind. Chris never told me the facts of the case, but it struck me——"

The words died away. Houghton's face changed, and he stared at a new visitor.

It was an eager, self-possessed visitor, who hardly waited for the servant to announce his name, but entered with the assurance of one who is accustomed to a welcome.

"Chris!"

"My dear Houghton!"

The exclamations were simultaneous, and the stranger had locked hands with his host almost before the group round Mrs. Houghton realized that Felix Christie was in the room.

It was nearly three years since any of his friends had seen Christie.

He was greatly changed. They would all have agreed on that point, but each would have interpreted the change according to his knowledge of the young writer and the limitations of his own outlook.

Sir Charles Buckley thought that the freshness of the boy had gone for ever. He had understood the freshness of the boy. The man, he felt, would puzzle him.

Houghton saw that his friend had the indescribably free, clear-eyed expression of one who has been living a life of solitude and simplicity.

Both Lady Buckley and her daughter-in-law observed that his appearance accorded well with the other men in the room; his clothes were fashionable; there was nothing of the unnecessary Bohemian about him.

Perhaps Joe saw the greatest change. His love affair with Euterpe Chippett occurred to the boy. He wondered at his own courage in asking Christie to solve the Chippett problem as he watched the clearly cut, somewhat severe outline of his friend's face in profile. Sir Charles looked milder and more accessible! It was only when he met Christie's eyes, and when he smiled, that Joe felt the warmth of his old affection and confidence.

"Why did you drop out of the clouds like this, Chris?" asked Houghton Buckley, when the first words of greeting and welcome had been exchanged.

"I suddenly made up my mind to return to London."

"Didn't you write to any of your friends?" said Sir Charles.

"I wrote to Miss Boscombe."

"Ettie Boscombe!" exclaimed Rosalind Buckley. "Do you know, Mr. Christie, we have become the greatest of friends? Ettie is a girl of such excellent taste and discrimination. She is simply devoted to Carlo."

Carlo was the Buckley baby.

"I am glad to hear of your friendship," said Christie. "I am afraid she hasn't many friends. We lived in the same house for a while when first I came to England. It was in Waterloo Road, but fortunately Ettie and her mother have moved away from that crowded neighbourhood."

"I think you were living in Waterloo Road when first you came to our house," observed Lady Buckley, looking at him very affectionately.

Christie laughed.

"Oh no, Lady Buckley! I was a proud householder at the time I had the pleasure of accepting your first invitation," he replied. "I was sharing a little shop in Drury Lane with a man named Millidew."

"I came across Millidew in Paris last autumn," said Houghton.

"Did you really?" exclaimed Christie, with a note of pleasurable excitement in his voice. "What was he doing? Where does he live?"

"I cannot tell you where he lives, but when I saw him he was making sketches at the Folies Bergéres."

"How did he look?"

Houghton shrugged his shoulders.

"Like one of his own caricatures of a Parisian. He talks French like a Frenchman, and he seemed to be very prosperous."

"Ned Millidew prosperous!" said Christie. "Is it possible?"

"His black hair was clipped to the shape of his head,

and he wears a tiny pointed beard," said Houghton. "He asked after you, in his voluble way, calling you his 'poor, beloved, romantic Felix'!"

"Dear old Ned!" said Christie, regretfully. "How I should like to see him again! I didn't realize till I arrived this morning how much I have missed him all these years."

"You must go to Paris to see him," said Sir Charles.

"Oh no! My next holiday will be a trip to Canada," answered Christie.

"Then you will give us a book of the New World," said one of the ladies, effusively. "There must be so many stories of love and adventure to be found among your own people, the Canadians."

"But Mr. Christie is not a Canadian," said Lady Buckley. "He was born in the United States, in New England."

"Isn't New England equally interesting?" replied the young lady. "I believe it is the very spot for quiet romance, with its quaint old towns and sleepy homesteads. There must be numberless secret stories waiting to be discovered and written. Perhaps some of them—the most beautiful and human—will never be written at all. Don't you agree with me, Sir Charles?"

"I certainly agree with you," answered Sir Charles.

His eyes twinkled, and he exchanged a lightning glance with Christie. The effusive young lady little suspected how her random words had hit the mark.

So the talk went on, Christie succeeding, after a little while, in diverting it from the topic of his own absence and return.

He did not accept the cordial invitation of Houghton and his wife to prolong his visit.

As he was leaving the house, after the promise of a speedy return, one of the other guests touched him on the arm.

"May I go with you, Felix? Which way are you walking?"

It was Luigi Martelli, son of the famous violinist, to

whom Christie had owed so much of the pain and pleasure of his first year in England. Their friendship had grown with the passing of time.

The two men, who had walked and talked so often together, turned with one accord towards the quietude of one of the parks.

"Are you going to stop in England now?" asked Martelli, after they had chatted for a while about their mutual friends and the occurrences of the past two years.

"Yes, I am delighted with the newness of old London," answered Christie. "Everything seems changed since I went away, but I know that is only the impression of the first day. I shall wake up to-morrow morning to find myself in exactly the same old place that I deserted two years ago."

"Are the new impressions so weak?" asked his companion.

"Say, rather, the old facts are so strong. That's the great charm of London. It never really changes. It absorbs and adapts every new idea and remains true to itself."

"Why, Felix, you're more of a London lover than ever," said his friend, with a laugh.

"Am I?" he replied. "Well, it's a different sort of love nowadays, Luigi. It is more temperate and reasonable than it used to be."

"I think that you're a different sort of man nowadays," said his companion.

"More temperate and reasonable too? Or more serious? Or more dull? Which is it, Luigi?"

Luigi Martelli only laughed again, and did not attempt to define his meaning.

He felt that Christie's books, however frank and sincere they were, would never quite show the writer as his intimate friends knew him. His likeable and lovable qualities were so marked, so untouched by pride or conceit, that even the brilliance of his work paled in their steady, satis-

fying glow. His was a personality that perpetually promised and suggested depths and heights that were even greater than his finest achievements.

Martelli took a copy of "Edelweiss" out of his pocket and put it into his companion's hands.

"I have bought this for my collection of first editions, Felix," he said. "Will you give me your signature?"

"With pleasure, but—my dear Luigi!—is it worth while?"

He smiled a little doubtfully as he wrote his name on the fly-leaf of the little green-covered book that has become so famous.

"Quite given up the violin?" asked his friend irrelevantly.

"No! I am considered a very fine player in our Swiss village. Sir Charles Buckley once told me that the day would come when I should long to forsake the love of my life—the pen—for the exacting mistress of my youth—the bow. That day will never dawn."

The two men parted at the gates of the park, within a short distance of Martelli's house.

Christie, for the second time, refused an invitation to spend the first evening of his return under an old friend's roof.

He was glad to be alone.

The shadow of his old restlessness and misery had lifted long ago in the tranquil beauty of the sun and stars on mountain heights. His thoughts wandered to them now as he slowly made his way under the leafy trees of the quiet English park. He seemed to see the eternal snows against the sky. The peace that filled his heart was born of that struggle and storm in which he had fled to their solitude.

Looking back upon the harassed days that preceded his departure from England, he realized the intensity of his own passions.

He had learned to know himself. The knowledge had come, not from introspection and despair, but from the wider and more tolerant outlook of healing Time.

As he had found peace and resignation in Nature, so thought and effort had made him patient and happy.

In the passing of his youth Christie foresaw, never more vividly than at this hour, the possibilities of his maturity.

He instinctively made his way, as of old, towards the river. The river! The highway to the sea, the symbol of the ebb and flow of life.

He found himself, when the sun was setting, leaning over Waterloo Bridge. He remembered how often, during his first six months in Switzerland, he had longed to stand on a bridge that spanned the Thames. The reality was disappointing. Christie smiled to himself. Had he outgrown all his simple, boyish pleasures?

A strange occurrence of the past hour filled his mind. He had seen Pearl Henning.

Inexplicable fate! He had seen Pearl within twenty-four hours of his return to London.

No one had been farther from his thoughts before the moment of their meeting. Suddenly, without any apparent reason, Christie wondered what had become of her, and as her face flashed into his recollection he happened to glance across the road and saw her.

It was Pearl, unmistakably Pearl, sitting in the pony-trap of Mr. Gambol's dreams, her head towards the shop-windows, so that Christie could only see one cheek, reddened by the sun, a great puff of hair, and the never-to-be-forgotten curve of her fair throat.

Her hat was piled with feathers and flowers as of old, and she wore a bright pink silk blouse, a white skirt, and long gloves.

As Christie looked at her he was strangely stirred, half with pleasure, half with pain.

Miss Gambol sat in the back seat, in a becomingly meek and depressed bonnet and gown, holding a baby in her arms.

Christie stood still, watching them, at the edge of the opposite kerb.

He saw Pearl speak to Miss Gambol over her shoulder, evidently giving some direction about the arrangement of the baby's elaborately frilled robe. Then he saw Mr. Gambol come out of a provision-shop carrying a square brown-paper box, suggestive of potted meats, and mount heavily to the driver's seat. He saw him smile approvingly at his wife, proudly at the infant, and graciously at his obviously grateful sister before he gave the pony a signal to start.

Pearl caught at her hat-brim as the trap moved, and laughed. She looked across the road, as if she were suddenly conscious of Christie's gaze. Their eyes met. For a second she did not recognize him, then her face flushed, and she turned away ; but as the distance between them widened she looked back and smiled.

He instantly raised his hat. Pearl bowed—loftily, as became her position as Mrs. Albert Gambol—and began to talk to her husband.

They disappeared in the distant traffic of a busy corner, and Christie saw them no more.

Every detail of this chance meeting passed through his mind as he leaned over Waterloo Bridge.

He had been glad to see Miss Gambol included in their party, even though she sat in a back seat and took care of the baby. She would worship that baby !

Christie sighed and murmured to himself—he always had a weakness for quotations—

" 'The children of Alice call Bartrum father ! ' "

Then he remembered Pearl's haughty bow. She had prided herself, in the old days, on the strict propriety of her behaviour.

Christie burst out laughing, to the amazement of the passers-by, who thought he was a madman, and in that laugh the last drop of bitterness against his old love passed away.

He had long forgiven her. He had long been indifferent to her, but he never forgot the old dream.

Softly the cool breeze of coming night blew across his face.

He thought of the night when he had first stood on the bridge, an ambitious boy, and of the lost music he was to find again in written words.

He thought of all the lives interwoven with his own in the city that he loved; of the secret of his birth and the affection of his brothers, who only knew him as their friend; of the little shop in Drury Lane, and of his dear old Ned Millidew; of his faithful dog, the sole companion of his travels.

Then he thought of the far distant little frame-house, in the shadow of the golden maples, where his mother waited patiently to see him.

His work, and all that it meant to him in its challenge and appeal to press onward—always onward—was never entirely absent in his retrospect of the past.

The old spell of the river, as he watched the flowing tide darkening beneath the bridge, stole over Christie's senses. It was slowly revealed to him that the change in his thoughts and outlook was only the renewal of his youth, for youth is not a question of years or of experience. Youth is eternal in the heart of a man who can see the splendour of a new day, the divinity in his fellow-men, the harmony of the world.

Then, as softly as the cool breeze of coming night blowing across his face—as deeply as the flowing tide darkening beneath the bridge—the love of a woman swept over Felix Christie. It had called him back to England. It had become his inspiration and his hope.

He had thought of her in the quiet Swiss valleys during his long absence; he had written to her many times; he had realized, at last, the meaning of his own dependence since first they met on her gentle sympathy—but he did not know she loved him.

The lights flashed out on the river-banks. A single star hung in the cloudless sky.

Christie looked at it for several minutes, wondering at its brilliance. Then, with a light heart, he went to see Ettie Boscombe.

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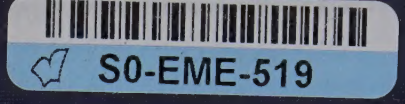
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